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THE MOST THRILLING

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THE UNKNOWN

By WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

This story is like a box within a box. On the outside—terror and tragedy in a setting of hair-trigger action. On the inside, a quiet, illuminating tale of gentleness, hope and faith.

ONE of the things that go bump in the night went BUMP.

It must have been a big thing. Or Thing. It jolted me almost out of bed.

I'd been dreaming I was walking through the woods, gun under my arm, and somewhere among the maples was a red deer. Walking or shooting, or both, usually found their way into my dreams somehow. There were reasons.

This inexplicable concussion in the night was made part of the dream.

The trees somehow became mountains. This was the Kasserine Pass. I was asleep in my foxhole when the counter-attack came. Its herald was the big shell bursting a few feet away and sending my rough walls tumbling in on me.

I fought and clawed to get my head above the avalanche. . . . And awoke fighting the bed clothes.

From somewhere out in the night came a long, superhuman shriek. It was deep winter and the ice on the lake was over a yard thick. Sometimes it breaks under its own increasing pressure, and a rift will run miles across it, howling just like a banshee.

But I knew that sound well. This blood-chilling shriek, echoing from the valley sides, was similar—but not the same. It was coming from quite another banshee.

It shut off abruptly.

The silence afterwards was as it must be on the airless moon. Thick snow muffles city noises but up in these empty northern latitudes, when winter has really

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set in, the quiet becomes all pervading and tomblike.

I fumbled for and found the matches under the pillow. The heat was going from the room, and with stiff fingers it wasn't easy to light the oil lamp at the side of my bunk. I blinked at the shards of glass gliting on the blankets. The window beyond my white, dead feet had a hole blown in it.

It must have been forty below out there.

The window faced northward up the valley, but there was no moon and a mass of snow-cloud brooded over us. There was a thinning of it far to the north and I could just detect the faint, gauzy dance of the Borealis.

But more immediately the trees were only blurred shadows on the white blur of the snow, and the ice-gleam of the lake was reduced to a feeble phosphorescence.

It had stopped snowing, however.

There had been no further sound since the shriek, but the door opened and in came Johnny with a blanket wrapped around him. He slept in the other tiny bedroom in this cabin. When I needed him, I thumped on the floor with the butt of a Lee-Enfield rifle.

This time I had not summoned him.

"You okay, Cap?" he asked.

As always, his voice was soft and level, like a well-tended lawn.

"Yes, I'm all right, Johnny. But the darn bed-clothes have got kind of tangled—and the window's broken. Did any of the blast come your way?"

"Felt it hit the cabin. But there doesn't seem to be any major damage, far as I can tell. Can you see anything out there, Cap?"

"Not a thing. Haven't a notion what it was. Maybe a plane crash, but it didn't sound like it to me. Maybe one of those rocket satellite things fell back on us."

Johnny began tucking my blankets back. "One thing for sure—it was traveling faster than Mach One. You heard it coming down—after it hit."

He went to the window, felt the jagged hole carefully, paused, listening.

"Nothing seems to be moving out there," he said, presently.

He meant he could hear nothing moving, which was tantamount to saying that nothing was *moving*. For Johnny's hearing, like that of most blind men, was extremely acute.

I looked at my watch. "An hour yet till dawn. We'll sit it out. Make some coffee, Johnny."

He managed to prepare it and block up the window at much

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the same time. Ex-sergeant John Bloom was good with his hands. He was pretty good at most things.

But he'd made two bad mistakes in his life.

One was marrying a girl after a week's acquaintance. You can't begin to get to know people in that time. When he was blinded and flown home, she came to see him once at the hospital, promised to come again—and never did. She vanished completely. Even the Army Pay Office couldn't locate her.

But I doubted if she ever went short of slices of soldiers' pay.

In imagination I could hear her Brooklyn slur: "Oh, *Johnny*—he's all washed up. *A wreck.* All his own damn fault, anyhow. He always was a mug."

I'd heard her say things as nasty. Her favorite catch-phrase was: "You gotta think about Number One some of the time."

Johnny's sole comment was: "You can't blame her."

He meant he couldn't. He couldn't blame anybody for anything. I told him he was too good for this world, which is as crass a statement as I ever made. This world happens to be short-stocked with good people. It can do with every one it's lucky enough to get.

Johnny's second mistake came in two parts, (1) treading on a mine, (2) walking into the minefield in the first place.

(1) Was accidental. (2) Was deliberate. He came to pick me out of the minefield. I'd seen the warning strand of barbed wire, all right—it was the egg laid by a Messerschmitt which blew me yards beyond it. I was deafened and stumbled, and bruised to hell. But otherwise I was okay. As soon as I'd recovered my senses, I could probably have walked out of it.

But Johnny didn't wait. He walked in. He slung me over his shoulder and started to walk out. He trod on the triple prongs of a Kraut S-mine almost at once.

An S-mine was the creation of one of the not so good people in the world. It was packed with ball-bearings. Touched off by the prongs, an explosive charge lifted it chest-high in the air. And there it exploded properly. The ball-bearings could turn you into a human currant cake.

After the initial mistake. Johnny went through the right motions. He flung himself and me down so that most of the fragments would pass above us. They did.

I stopped only three of the balls, two with my backside and one with my spine. Johnny stopped only two, and those only with the fleshy parts of his thighs. But he had a bonus: a fragment of the casing passed

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just behind his eyes, severing the optic nerves.

I never walked again. Johnny never saw again.

I had no family—my only brother was killed later in the Ardennes. Johnny left his parents and came and looked after me.

We'd been together for fifteen years now, twelve of them spent in this lakeside village in Maine. I had been born and reared in Maine. My face fitted there—it was long and lean, a Yankee face. When I left, I had always meant to come back to the forested hills, the peace rarely broken and then only by bird-songs, and distant guns, and the splash of a canoe paddle. Where the air was as crystal clear as the tumbling streams save for the rare blue stains of woodsmoke.

But I had never dreamed I should return as a helpless cripple.

I suppose it was a mistake to go back there. When from my window I saw the young men strike up through the birch grove on a bear hunt or wander down to the lake with their fishing tackle, the memories came back with an ache of longing. And the impotence made anger flame up in me. My self-control was coming apart at the seams. I had become a moody man.

The time of dawn came, but the dawn itself lagged reluctantly behind. The clear patch in the north had been filled in by the steadily thickening snow-cloud which, combined with the screen of the valley-wall, strangled the sunlight at birth. Our surroundings remained obscure.

The outlook was almost as dark. More snow on top of what we'd had would make it tough indeed to clear the already blocked roads.

Waiting still for light, we washed and shaved and Johnny dressed. As always, he groomed himself as though he were about to step out on first parade. He used a cutthroat razor without ever nicking himself. Water never took the shine from his brown hair; his head was as sleek as a chestnut. His parting was a white, ruled line.

It was hard to accept that his clear gray eyes—not sunken, but healthy and so never removed—weren't observing everything, let alone anything.

Once in poor taste, I joked: "Own up, Johnny, you're faking, just for the pension."

He answered seriously: "I *do* see things, Cap—sort of in my mind's eye. It's queer. You know where things are when you know they're there, of course. But you also get a way of knowing things are there without anyone telling you. You can get it in a place you've never been to before."

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He turned his head, listening. "Someone coming," he said.

I heard nothing until the knocking on the door, and then we had visitors. Aylott, who owned the sporting camp, and Barnes, who ran a chicken farm.

Barnes was a natural whiner, and he was whining now.

"I'll sue the Government. Blown half my sheds to hell, they have. Killed my best sitters. . . . Think there'll be any more trouble on account of that thing, Cap? Might it blow up again?"

"What thing?" I asked.

It was Aylott who answered, thrusting a thick forefinger at the window. "That."

I looked. Daylight was settling slowly like a precipitate from above. Some three hundred yards off, in the tree-less patch up the valley-side, I discerned dimly an unfamiliar shape. I reached for my field glasses and studied it.

It was a slatey gray, like the sky. Maybe fifteen feet high, ribbed like the dome of Florence Cathedral but tilted askew. Its outline was like half of an enormous hen's egg, with the flatter end buried deep under the snow.

A cracked egg, the glasses showed me. The fissures were fine and dark. The lines of ribbing were twisted away from symmetry.

"What d'you make of it, Cap'n?" asked Aylott, presently.

"I've never seen anything like it," I said. "But then, I've never seen a—" I fumbled for an example. "I've never seen an H-bomb."

Barnes sucked in breath sharply: "You think maybe they've dropped one, and it hasn't gone off?"

"I didn't say it was a bomb. Of course, it might be something that was dropped accidentally. But from the speed at which it came, I'd say it was fired—by rocket. Obviously it hasn't exploded. I don't think anything exploded. The damage was done by displaced air and concussion. We're seeing only part of the thing, anyhow — it's anyone's guess how much is buried.

"But do you think it's a bomb?" Aylott persisted.

"Good heavens, Aylott, how can anyone tell from here?" I said, peevishly, because I was eager to explore this novelty and yet frustrated by conditions. The thing was embedded on a slope too steep and difficult for the others to manhandle my sled up it. As usual, I was condemned to the spectator's role. I went on: "It might only be the broken-off tail of some new monster plane. The rest of the wreckage could be miles away."

"Like a cup of coffee?" asked Johnny, addressing our visitors.

"No, I've had one," said Aylott, irritably. His tone was so

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untypical that I looked at him appraisingly. He avoided my eye.

Barnes licked his upper lip and said: "Sure, Johnny — thanks."

They were both frightened men.

This struck me as odd. The war had not touched them. Both had been exempted from service. Both ran one-man businesses. Aylott had a heart murmur. Barnes . . . well, no one knew much about Barnes. He was a hermit living among chickens.

No son of Center Dam had as much as set foot on the embarkation gangplank of a troopship. There had been no food shortages in this self-supporting community. The war had been as remote from Center Dam as an earthquake in Japan.

Perhaps that was why I'd chosen to end my days here. Not wholly consciously I reasoned that if the last war missed Center Dam, maybe the next one would also.

Although I'd been born way off in the eastern part of the State, and had never set eyes on Center Dam until after the war, I was yet a native of Maine. And it seemed queer to me that I had never been fully accepted or absorbed into this village. Nor Johnny either. For Maine folk are as hospitable as any in the world.

But to me it was obviously so.

Burly Jim Aylott's camp was always jam-packed with sportsmen in the season. He was ever the jovial host and the "sports" took him to their heart.

Yet even at his most genial on a Saturday night in the bar of the C.D. Hotel, bright-lit among its cluster of cabins, to me he still maintained a thin, transparent, but nevertheless solid wall of reserve. Like a glass screen. I could see him plainly through it, but I couldn't reach out and touch him.

I found the same screen between myself and others, too, always excepting Doc Nunn.

We weren't wholly welcome in Center Dam. Only now, watching these two locals, did I begin to sense the reason. We maimed creatures were a standing reminder of the lunatic world which lay beyond the walls of the sheltered valley. And of what that lunatic world could do to folk.

Also, maybe, we were a silent reproach to a community which, favored by chance and nature, had remained detached from the woes besetting civilization. I suppose, because the war had made no demands on them, they had come to think of it as none of their business.

But in their hearts they knew they were part of the common

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fabric of humanity and could not tear themselves off from it. So they felt guilty. And the guilty expect to be punished. Maybe the next war wouldn't let them off so lightly.

The symbol of the next war was the H-bomb. Its herald, a rocket from the skies.

They were half expecting it, dreading it, and like fate it had come. Or something frighteningly like it.

Barnes held his coffee mug with both hands as he drank, and even so he spilled some of it.

Somebody thumped on the door. Johnny opened up. Dr. Nunn, aged and retired, teetered in. He walked awkwardly because of arthritic hip-joints, which often he cursed. (And as often I silenced a jealous inward voice which said: "Well, at least you *can* walk.")

He said: "Everyone's in a panic about that thing. I told 'em to keep away from it for the time being. Not that anyone's actually straining their gut to reach it. They keep asking me what it is. They're afraid it's a bomb. I'm afraid they may be right. What do you think about it Cap?"

I repeated that I'd seen nothing like it, but it could be a rocket missile that had gone astray.

"In which case," I added, "it'll have a dummy warhead. So there should be no danger. Is the line still dead?"

The telephone line was a single strand wandering every which way through the woods, linking this trapper with that, one village with the next. In this area where sudden accident or illness might strike isolated men, folk had to keep in touch. Besides, the loneliness got you sometimes, and then it was a relief to ring someone up and exchange gossip. Or merely to eavesdrop on this party line—"rubbering on the line" we called it.

But late yesterday somewhere the link snapped. A rotten tree falling under its burden of snow, maybe. The weather had been too foul to go searching for the break. And now the single road running through the valley had been blocked by drifts at either end.

We were cut off from the world, except for the radio.

Dr. Nunn answered: "Yes, I near cranked the batteries flat trying to raise Forbes." (Forbes was the Game Warden.) "Wanted him to radio his HQ to contact the Army."

Johnny said: "The Army boys probably have a rough idea where it is—if they fired it. Radar tracking would have told them. They'll probably be along to collect it soon as the roads are clear."

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Aylott exclaimed hoarsely: "Look! Quietly, out there!"

Barnes and the doctor joined him at the window, blocking my view. I asked them sharply to let me see. They moved aside silently. The black oblong of an open doorway had appeared in the gray dome. The door itself seemed to be hanging from twisted hinges, and a corner fragment had broken off, as though it had been hammered open.

I grabbed my field-glasses and trained them on the opening.

A white shape appeared therein and stood fumbling with something which looked like a short crowbar.

"A man in a space-suit," I reported. "That thing's no bomb. My gosh, at last they've succeeded in firing a man into space! He's come back with a bang, but he's come back alive. Aylott—you and Barnes go up there and lend him a hand. Johnny, make some more coffee—that guy'll be dying for some."

Aylott's face was relief itself. His normal cheerful grin returned. "Come on, Barnes, let's go make history—or at least get our names in the papers."

Barnes was relieved, too, and grouched only mildly. "All the same, the government's gotta pay for the chickens."

They went.

Dr. Nunn asked: "Think that feller's hurt at all? Maybe I'd better go get my little black bag out of the junk room."

"No, wait. I think he's okay."

The spaceman, as it would seem proper to call him, had dropped the thin, cyclindrical object he'd been fooling with. It had fallen in the snow, and now he was gingerly lowering himself from the doorway after it. The space-suit seemed to be hampering his movements badly. I didn't wonder. Although ridged at the joints, it was plenty bulky.

The globular space-helmet was white, also, with a transparent aperture. The face behind I could see only indistinctly. It was darkish—either deeply tanned or else the man was colored. Why shouldn't a Negro be first into space, anyhow, if he were the fittest specimen for the job to be done.

The spaceman slid into the snow up to his thighs. Then he stood very still for a little while, as though adjusting himself to this uncertain renewal of contact with earth. Then he began fumbling slowly about in the snow around him.

I watched, and said suddenly: "Doc, maybe I was wrong. He appears rather dazed. That crash might have given him a concussion."

"I'll have to bring my things here—I can't get up to him. Not

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up that snow slope with these unworkable joints."

"Okay, Doc, Aylott and Barnes will get him here somehow. He may be glad of this bed. Go get your bag of tricks—and tell Johnny I want him, will you?"

Duly, Johnny came in from what served us as a kitchen.

"The chair, Johnny," I said, flinging back the bed-clothes.

He lifted me as though I were hollow, enfolded me in my dressing-gown, sat me in my wheel-chair. I ran it over to the window.

Aylott and Barnes had come into the picture now, big, gross figures snow-shoeing it awkwardly up the white wave of snow.

They began to call and wave as they struggled up the slope. The spaceman showed no sign of having noticed them, and continued to fish around in the snow.

He found what he was seeking when the others had got within twenty feet of him. It was the thin, black cylinder. As he straightened up, he became aware of Aylott and Barnes. For a few seconds he stared at them. Then, almost casually, he pointed the cylinder at them.

With the hair-trigger reaction of a scared man, Aylott, in the lead, flung himself face-down. It was the slower Barnes who caught the full force of the ray which leapt from the cylinder.

It must have felt like being struck by lightning.

I had a split-second glimpse of the ray. It was like a bar of plutonium at the moment of fission. Concentrated, eye-scorching light, intolerably effulgent—a brand plucked from the furnace of the sun itself.

Its glare, rebounding from the snow-sheeted landscape, seemed to beat up against the lowering cloud-layer and repel it by sheer light-pressure.

The three distant figures, the mysterious projectile, were blotted out by the all-pervading brightness which the field-glasses funneled, in twin jets like white-hot molten metal, straight into my eyes.

I dropped the glasses with a shout of agony.

Johnny was at my side within seconds. His exploratory fingers ran lightly over me. His cool hands came to rest over mine, which I was clasping to my seared eyed.

"What happened, Cap?"

I told him in breathless, tailless sentences. Tears of pain leaked between my fingers on to his.

"Poor Barnes! He got it worse than. . . . It may even have killed . . . Johnny, warn everyone. Tell them to . . . no, they can't

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get out of the valley. Tell them to lock themselves in their cabins, block their windows, not to look out. That murderous maniac may be alone—or there may be a whole crew like him in that thing."

"Okay, Cap." The touch of him went.

Soon I heard his voice, strong and clarion-clear, repeating my orders outside as though he were addressing morning parade.

Contemptibly, I almost hated him for being so completely in command of himself, while I, his erstwhile commanding officer, was huddled in panic. I was in real fear that now I was as blind as he, and I knew I couldn't accept it as he had.

I'd never accepted being a cripple. Hatred of my fate, shot through with spasms of self-pity, was always returning.

And now the possibility of blindness added to that. . . .

I clenched my teeth and forced myself to drop my hands. Then I opened my eyes slowly.

There was neither intense light nor blackness. The tear-ducts hadn't quite closed and I saw the bedroom through a swimmy gray mist with a black bar, like a huge hyphen, superimposed on the scene whichever way I looked. But—I *saw*. And the bar was slowly fading: it was only the counter-image of the super-bright ray.

The relief was like a shot of benzedrine.

I looked blearily at the slope of the valley—my glasses were still somewhere on the floor. The projectile was there, unchanged. The spaceman had progressed a few yards down the slope, towards the village, and now stood knee-deep in snow turning his head this way and that, as though undecided where to go. He was still holding the ray-gun, but slackly, at his side.

Near the foot of the slope, floundering back along the trail they'd made, were Aylott and Barnes. Barnes was sobbing—I could hear him faintly. His head was lowered and he was holding a hand to his face. Aylott, apparently unharmed, had one arm around Barnes and was helping him along.

They passed from the frame of my view.

I called Johnny. He came at once.

"Is there any sign of Doctor Nunn?"

"He's trying to get to them. He told me they were coming back. Can you see all right now, Cap?"

"Well enough," I said grimly. "Give me that rifle. And a clip of shells."

For once he hesitated. Then he did as I'd asked. I slipped off the magazine pressed the five .303

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shells into it, one by one, against the pressure of its spring, and jammed the magazine back on. I yanked back the bolt and rammed a round up the spout. I slid the marker along the scale, setting the sights at 300 yards.

A couple of thrusts with the butt drove Johnny's temporary window patch out into the snow. Chill air seeped in. I poked the barrel through the open square, rested it on the window frame, thumbed over the safety catch.

I tucked the butt into my shoulder, began to take aim. A hand stole past my face, fumbled, pushed the safety catch on.

I looked round with almost a snarl. "Johnny, what the hell—"

"Take it easy, Cap. Cover him but hold your fire. We don't know who he is or what it's all about yet. The guy might be dazed. Maybe he imagined he was being attacked and fired automatically in self-defense."

I swallowed. My hands were trembling with anger. I couldn't have hit the projectile, let alone the unknown spaceman. I tried to calm myself.

"That thing he fired, Johnny, wasn't a weapon known in the Pentagon. *Ergo*, it's a foreign secret weapon. And he's probably a member of an invading army — rocket-borne. A *blitzkrieg* by rocket — for all we know, thousands of projectiles like that have landed. Invasion by barges is a bit out of date, you know."

Johnny was skeptical. "Who would launch an attack in midwinter and bog its army down in snow like this? Anyhow, if there were others the radio would have been yelling its head off. I've been speaking to folk out there who've been keeping their radios on. Everything seems to be perfectly normal."

"You think this guy's on his own?"

"Yes, Cap, I do. Furthermore—"

He broke off, his keen ear catching some sound, and went swiftly from the room. Soon he returned with Aylott. They were carrying an unconscious Barnes between them. Dr. Nunn hobbled behind with his black bag.

Barnes' face was a mess. Swollen white blisters covered it, and little shreds of skin were peeling off.

"On the bunk," I said, and they laid him there.

Dr. Nunn said: "I've doped him with morphia. He's out of pain—for the present. The burns aren't so bad as they look. It's his eyes I'm worried about. Wish I'd kept my ophthalmoscope. Curse this weather—he ought to be rushed to the hospital."

He opened his bag, produced bottles and bandages, began to treat Barnes' face.

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Aylott looked at me. The geniality was still missing but also missing now was fear. His face was grave, his eyes steady.

"You could have beaten it right away, and left Barnes to it," I said. "By burdening yourself with him, you risked sharing his fate."

He shrugged. "What else can you do, when it comes to it?"

The coming of the spaceman had settled a vital question for him, which the war had not. No man can foretell what he'll do "when it comes to it." Aylott had proved his courage. Now he was at peace with himself.

His gaze dropped to my rifle, traveled to its likely target.

"If you shoot him, Captain, the scientists will never forgive you. I'm pretty sure we're seeing our first visitor from another planet."

I stared at him. He didn't seem to be kidding.

Johnny said: "I'd suspected that, too."

I looked from one to the other of them, then asked Aylott: "What makes you so sure? You couldn't have more than glimpsed his face."

"A glimpse was enough. His complexion is dark green. He has no nose to speak of—just a single orifice. His mouth is lipless—it's just a wide slit in his face. His eyes are queer—they slope down to the outer corners. Makes him look kind of sad. But they're bright eyes—intelligent."

"Well, at least he can see out of them," I said, bitterly. "I doubt if Barnes will ever see again."

Dr. Nunn, busy at the bed, sighed. "Guess you're right, Cap. The scarred corneas might be replaced, but I think the damage runs deeper than that."

I bit my lips and scowled at the unknown, who was still standing on the slope looking aimless.

I said: "If he starts coming this way, he'll have had it. So will the scientists. They'll have to make do with a dead specimen. Better a dead Martian than another blinded and burnt human—there are children in Central Dam, I'll remind you."

At which moment the unknown made up his mind. He resumed his slow advance down the slope.

I flicked the safety catch and raised my gun. I was ready for him.

"Leave him to me, Cap," said Johnny urgently. "I'll stop him. He can't blind me."

I paused irresolutely, and Johnny was gone.

"The fool!" I said, savagely. "He'll get burnt. Stop him, Aylott."

"Only if you promise not to shoot," said Aylott, firmly.

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"Don't argue, man. . . . Okay, I promise. For the time being."

Aylott hurried out after Johnny, I waited impatiently for their return. Dr. Nunn quietly finished his work on Barnes. The unconscious man's head was covered with gauze and bandages, and a thick cottonwool pad was bound over his eyes.

"Well, that's the best I can do," said Nunn.

Boorishly, I didn't answer. I was on edge for Johnny's return. How much of my concern was for him, how much for myself without him, I shouldn't care to apportion.

When at last I saw him again, he was advancing steadily up the valley-side in the rough path that had been made. Aylott was a pace behind him, and maintaining that pace. The grotesquely padded alien was moving cautiously down the same path, gun in hand. The meeting was inevitable.

I swore aloud. Nunn looked over my shoulder at the scene.

"I might have known Johnny would talk Aylott round," I said, sourly. "Johnny always gets his own way."

"Let's hope he can talk the stranger round, then," said Nunn, and tut-tutted. "Incredibly foolish, going up there without any protection at all. Even a wet towel wrapped around the face, and sun-glasses . . . I hope I shan't have to do that nasty job over again. Haven't the stuff —or the heart for it."

"You won't," I promised, and took careful aim. I had promised not to shoot if Aylott brought Johnny back. He had failed to, I was free to make another promise—this time, to shoot.

My sights were trained on where the unknown's heart should be, if he were just that much human. But I was also watching his gun arm. If that begin to lift. . . .

It did, when Johnny and Aylott were only a few yards off.

I fired.

Just as I squeezed the trigger, the unknown slipped on the snow slope and veered sideways. I hit him, all the same. The impact bowled him over. The big white shape disappeared under the general whiteness.

Johnny spun around and raised his arm imperatively in the "hold your fire" signal. Then he and Aylott hurried forward and all but disappeared, too, as they investigated the fallen figure.

"Right on the nose, Cap," said Nunn, patting my shoulder. "You did the right thing."

"I saved them from a roasting."

"Of course."

Why, then, did I feel uneasy, almost guilty?

Slowly, three figures became

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erect on the slope. The alien was in the middle. Aylott had secured the gun. Johnny was grasping the alien's arm, not as though he were about to frog-march him, but in a friendly kind of way. Aylott began to gesture, using the gun as a pointer. The alien gestured also, Aylott investigated something on the alien's back. Johnny began doing something there, too.

After a minute or so, Aylott pointed to the projectile, made as if to go to it. The alien pulled him back gently.

More sign language followed.

"What the hell's going on?" I said, feeling gloomy and out of it. "Hand me up those field-glasses, Doc."

As soon as I began to refocus, the little party started down the path together, the unknown still in the center and seemingly being guided by the other two. They passed from view.

I turned my chair from the window and looked at the doctor questioningly. "So now we're all pals together. I don't get it."

He rubbed his chin, looking away. "The blind leading the blind," he mumbled, cryptically, and weaved his painful way to Barnes and began to take his pulse.

The coin dropped. "You mean, that other-world creature is blind?"

"Not quite," said Nunn, absently. He was thinking of something else. "Barnes will be coming out of it soon. That was the last of my morphia. It's not going to be a joyful awakening."

I banged the arm of my chair with frustration. "What *can* we do? If I could only walk! I feel so helpless."

"We're all helpless right now," said Nunn.

Presently, Aylott and Johnny led the alien in. In his thick-white suit he looked enormous in this small room. His face was as Aylott had described it, except that his curiously slanting eyes were half-closed and no longer bright.

"Where did it hit him?" I asked.

They ignored me. Aylott looked distressed. He grabbed the doctor's arm.

"Doc, can you help? This poor devil's suffocating. The captain shot two holes in the air-tank pack on his back. We've plugged them with our handkerchiefs, but most of the stuff escaped first. He has little more than is left in his suit. It won't last long. But we don't know what the stuff is. It's not our kind of air."

"It smells like almonds," said Johnny. He had gently eased the big figure into the chair by the stove. The contrast made the chair look like a child's.

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"So does prussic acid gas," said Nunn, looking worried. "But surely it can't be that." He went behind the chair, sniffing at the air-tank on its harness. He coughed suddenly and violently. "Can't identify it," he choked. "But I guess . . . enough of it . . . would kill us."

Anxious to avoid condemnation as a murderer in their eyes, I said: "There must be reserve tanks in his ship, maybe whole compartments—"

"No," said Aylott, sharply and with hostility "The ship's all smashed up inside. When you get close enough, you can see it's falling apart."

"All the same—"

"No. He indicated clearly enough by signs that there was no hope there. It's a broken shell. It was a crash landing. He was alone."

"Then he was doomed, anyhow," I claimed. "You can't blame me."

"Nobody's blaming you," said Aylott. "Can we forget you for just a little while and think of him?"

"All right, all right. Here's my pen. There's a writing pad on that table. Get him to write down the formula of his atmosphere. The doc's still got plenty of chemicals and apparatus. There's chance he could whip up something that'll last your friend till we can contact civilization again and get the stuff laboratory-produced. It's worth trying."

Dr. Nunn looked doubtful. Aylott wavered. "We'll never understand his chemical symbols."

"Okay, you say he's intelligent," I said. "Maybe intelligent enough to draw rough diagrams of atomic structures, the component elements. One dot, with another dot circling it, for hydrogen. One dot, two dots circling it—helium. And so on. Get it? I know something about it. Could be I could fathom it out."

"Maybe it would be simpler to take him to my place and let him look over my stock," said Dr. Nunn.

Johnny said: "That's a mile away, Doc. He'd use up too much energy struggling that distance through the snow, have to breathe too hard. It'd likely kill him."

"Anyhow, Doc, he couldn't look over your stock," said Aylott. "It's become obvious to us that he can see little more than dim outlines. He must come from a planet where the daylight is extremely bright. Earth to him seems as dark as Pluto would to us."

"Then for Pete's sake why did he land here?" I asked.

"I doubt if he meant to," said Aylott. "More likely he meant to orbit Earth, and take a quick

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survey, but something went wrong and he crashed. Skip that for now. What can we do to help? Maybe there's something in your idea, Captain, but if the poor guy can't see what he's doing—"

"The torch," said Johnny, suddenly.

Aylott banged a fist into his palm. "Sure, the torch. Let's try it."

He picked up the ray-gun he'd laid on the table, and examined a stud on its side. "This isn't meant to be a weapon. It's only a torch—providing the kind of light *he* needs. It's blinding to us. He saw that—too late. He was scared to use it again. He chose to grope on through the dark and the unknown. That's the sort of guy he is."

I looked away, and felt depressed. I saw my gun leaning against the wall by the window. I felt like smashing it.

Aylott went on: "This stud was bent and jammed in the crash. He was working on it, then it dropped in the snow. He located it and got it straight just as we came on the scene. He only wanted to see who or what we were."

There was a faint moan from the bunk. Barnes was stirring. Nunn went to his side, made soothing sounds.

I looked at the alien, motionless and in discomfort in the chair. His eyes were open wider but there wasn't much life in them. His thin mouth was parted. His tongue looked brown and dry. He was gasping.

"Give me that pad," I said. Aylott passed it. I drew a few simple atoms in progressive series, was stumped for some symbol to represent the atmosphere, then decided on a sketch purporting to be a cloud of gas. Beside it I set a useless query mark.

"Give it to him."

Aylott pressed pad and pen into the alien's thickly gauntletted hands. The fingers closed on them. The eyes moved, looked down blindly.

I wheeled myself to the window down, opened it wide and got away from it.

"Aaah!" came from Barnes.

I said: "Aylott, direct that torch out of the window, else we'll burn the joint down. We'll have to gamble he can see enough by reflected light from the snow. You can stay if you want, Johnny. Doc, you'd better wait in the other room. We can't risk your eyes."

"I'm staying with Barnes," said Nunn. He crouched over the slowly awakening man, shielding him with his slight twisted body and pulling the blankets further over him. I was satisfied that Barnes' eyes would be protected

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from further harm by the thick, cottonwool pad.

"Very well, Doc, but keep your back turned and your eyes shut. Aylott, you'll find some dark glasses in that drawer. Put them on—*and* keep your eyes tightly shut while the thing's working."

I turned my chair away from him. "Count slowly up to five," I went on. "Switch on at five. Give him around three minutes. Tell us when you switch off.

"Right," said Aylott. "You set, Johnny? Keep facing that way. Here we go. One, two, three . . ."

I shut my eyes and buried my head in my arms.

". . . four, five."

Nothing could be heard except weak, inarticulate cries from Barnes. But I felt warmth on the back of my neck, warmth that became radiant heat.

The seconds dragged on. There came tiny sounds of movement and then paper rustling.

My neck felt as though it were blistering. I wanted to shield it with my hands, but it would be stupid to uncover my face.

Eternity went on, marked only by intervals between Barnes' moans. The paper had ceased rustling. I had an uncanny feeling that I was being watched intently. There were mad thoughts crossing my mind. Suppose the alien was faking? Now he had us all with our back to him and our eyes shut. Suppose, seeing that, he went berserk and—

There was a small, floppy thud. The pad had fallen to the floor.

"It's off now!" snapped Aylott.

Like a tortoise, I put forth my head, turned it. The alien lay back, the pad at his feet, the pen lost somewhere. His eyes were closed. His face was very dark now, nearly black with congestion.

I rued my uncharitable suspicions. In near despair I said: "There won't be time enough."

Aylott pounced on the pad, frowned at it, thrust it at me. Set beside my little protons, and electrons in orbit, was a single larger system of orbits, shakily drawn.

Nine orbits. The solar system. Either the alien had misunderstood my intention or else realized that a full answer was beyond his resources now. Or beyond ours.

But he had succeeded in getting one message across. There was a simple cross marked in the orbit nearest the sun.

"Mercury," I said. "He comes from Mercury."

That explained the intense sunlight he was accustomed to. Also his slow movements under our gravitation. But it left a lot more unexplained, which to us would have to remain forever unknown.

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"Doctor," called Aylott, peering intently through the faceplate. "Come quick—I think he's going."

Dr. Nunn hobbled across and gave his verdict. "Very soon now, I'm afraid. Suffocation."

We looked, horrified and helpless, at the strange being dying before our eyes, far from his world, far from our understanding. Except Johnny, that is. He'd begun to feel around the Mercurian's neck and shoulders, sliding little studs.

"Johnny's right—take his helmet off," I said, thickly. "It's the last gamble left. Our atmosphere is probably useless to him but it can hardly be worse than nothing."

Aylott was already helping Johnny. All at once the helmet came off in their hands. They lifted it free. It was like opening a furnace door. Cooking hot gases boiled out into the room with a raw, sharp smell of almonds.

We all began coughing and our eyes streamed water.

Luckily, the window was still wide open, and much of the expanding gas went pressing out to freedom.

Then a miracle happened. Because of my smarting eyes and convulsions of coughing, I glimpsed it only intermittently.

The Mercurian's strange eyes opened wide. His face paled. He stood up slowly, his mouth still agape in that nightmare face. His hands touched his wrists and gauntlets fell silently to the floor.

His naked green hands were surprisingly thin and delicate. His fingers were pointed and without nails.

He groped around him. His left hand brushed Johnny's cheek, returned, touched it properly.

And Johnny covered his eyes with his hands and began to tremble.

The Mercurian moved forward, towards me. I bent double as another bout of coughing racked my chest. Burning fingers touched the sore place at the back of my neck. The touch was withdrawn and the pain went with it. All pain.

I sat up in speechless awe, and tremors began to run through me. Through my whole body. Through my legs, to my feet. I could feel my feet.

The Mercurian could not see where to turn next. A pale shaken Johnny came up behind him and began to guide him gently. For Johnny could see now.

Johnny led him past the astounded Aylott to Dr. Nunn, who was sitting petrified on the edge of the bunk. The Mercurian extended his left arm.

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"Take his hand, Doctor," Johnny whispered.

Dazedly, Nunn did so. The tired stoop, the twisted awkwardness of his limbs, disappeared. He was made straight and whole. As long as I live, I shall never forget the expression on the face of the healer as he himself was healed.

The Mercurian, his face now all agony, as though he had absorbed all the pain he had removed, bent forward, groping along the bunk, feeling the shape of the groaning Barnes. He laid his palm on Barnes' head like a benediction. The groaning ceased.

The Mercurian straightened up and stood stock-still for a moment.

Then with a sound in his throat like the slow tearing of cloth, he fell forward across the bunk and its occupant.

I was helping to lift him before I even realized I was on my feet again. And beside me Nunn was helping, too, strong and lithe for all his age.

We laid the stranger gently on his back on the floor. Death had been delayed but not cheated. I closed his queer eyes. His skin was silk-smooth and still very warm. But by the standards of his world he was cold—ice-cold.

Barnes sat up suddenly, plucking at his bandages.

He protested, whiningly: "What sort of game are you playin' on me? Who was that jumpin' about on me? What's the idea of blindfoldin' me? Get this stuff off—let me see, willya?"

"Take it easy, Barnes, you're all right," said Nunn, unbandaging him expertly.

As the pad came away, we saw that Barnes' skin was clear, unmarked, and his mean little eyes were alive with indignation.

Aylott said, uncertainly: "I was never a religious man. But now . . . I don't know."

Johnny said in an undertone: "He saved others but couldn't save himself."

Barnes stared at us, indignation passing into puzzlement.

"Who—me? What are you talkin' about? What's been goin' on here?"

I said: "He didn't waste much time scribbling on that damn—fool pad. He was studying us, seeing our troubles. I felt him watching."

"So did I," said Johnny.

Dr. Nunn flexed his knee, straightened it again, with quiet content. He gave a little sigh of happiness, and said: "Gosh, it's great to feel really fit again. You know, I never wholly scoffed at the so-called miracle cures. Ever read Alexis Carrel? He examined some of those cases — hopeless cases. And then saw the cures

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happen before his eyes. And he was no sucker—he was a Nobel Prize man, for medical research. Psycho-somatics is stumbling along the same path. From what we've seen, we've got to accept it now: sudden organic changes to nerves and muscle and bone *are* possible."

"Unfortunately, our friend seemed unable to do anything with inorganic chemicals," I said. "It seems plain idiotic that he had to die of suffocation. But he fought to the end. That last effort of his was magnificent."

"The triumph of the spirit," said Aylott. "I'm glad he came. It's done something for my spirit."

There was a little shriek. Barnes, who had been looking up at us, listening with his mouth open, had happened to look down and see the strange, still form on the floor.

"Gosh, who's that?"

"That," said Dr. Nunn, "is something we can't tell you, Barnes. I only wish we could. We humans tend to get big-headed about our scientific advances. The conquest of matter, the conquest of space, and the rest of it. Then something like this happens and we're reminded of the real scale of things. We're on a tiny island in an infinite sea. And in that sea are countless other islands, larger, maybe, or smaller—but all unknown."

That was two years ago.

I wouldn't say man's knowledge has increased all that much in the interim.

For myself, I left Maine and the impossible wish to return to boyhood. I went back into business in the immense dog-fight called Los Angeles. It's a one-man business. Literally and figuratively I stand on my own feet.

When Johnny's sight returned, he wanted to use his eyes. He went looking. For her. I've not heard yet whether he's found her. I still wonder whether she'll be worth the finding. Maybe he saw some good in her that I never did. I just don't know. As Nunn said, there's a great many things we don't know. About other people. About ourselves. About other souls on other planets.

THE END

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THE STARS ARE CALLING, MR. KEATS

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

We had much in common with the queegy bird: a kind of lameness, a wistful yearning, and a memory for certain things...

HUBBARD had seen queegy birds before, but this was the first time he had ever seen a lame one.

However, if you discounted its crooked left leg, it didn't differ particularly from the other birds on display. It had the same bright yellow topknot and the same necklace of blue polka dots; it had the same royal blue beads of eyes and the same pale-green breast; it had the same bizarre curvature of beak and the same outlandish facial expression. It was about six inches long, and it weighed in the neighborhood of one and a quarter ounces—

Hubbard realized that he had paused. The clerk, a high-breasted girl wearing one of the latest translucent dresses, was looking at him questioningly from the other side of the bird counter. He cleared his throat. "What happened to its leg?" he asked.

The girl shrugged. "Got broke during shipment. We marked him down but nobody'll buy him anyway. They want it in tip-top shape."

"I see," Hubbard said. Mentally he reviewed the little he knew about queegy birds: they were native to Queeg, a primitive province of the Venerian Tri-State Republic; they could remember practically anything if it was repeated to them once or twice; they responded to association words; they were highly adaptable, but they refused to breed anywhere except in their native habitat, so the only way to commercialize them was by shipping them from Venus to Earth; fortunately they were sturdy enough to en-

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dure the acceleration and deceleration that shipment involved—

Shipment . . .

"It's been in space then!" Hubbard spoke the words before he thought.

The girl made a malicious *moue*, nodded. "I always said space was for the birds."

Hubbard knew he was supposed to laugh. He even tried to. After all, the girl had no way of knowing that he was an ex-spaceman. On the surface he looked just like any other middle-aged man wandering through a five and ten dollar store on a February afternoon. But he couldn't laugh. No matter how hard he tried.

The girl didn't seem to notice. She went on in the same vein: "I wonder why it is that eggheads are the only people who ever travel to the stars."

Because they're the only ones who can stand the loneliness and even they can stand it just so long, Hubbard almost said. Instead, he said, "What do you do with them when nobody wants them?"

". . . Oh, you mean the birds. Well, first you take a paper bag and pump some natural gas into it, you don't need very much, then you—"

"How much is it?"

"You mean the *lame* one?"

"Yes."

"You *are* a tesseract, aren't you! . . . 6.95—plus 17.50 for the cage."

"I'll take it," Hubbard said.

The cage was awkward to carry and the cover kept sliding off and every time it did the queegy bird gave a loud cheep! and the people on the airbus, and afterwards on the suburban street, turned and stared, and Hubbard couldn't help feeling like a fool.

He'd had hopes of getting his purchase into the house and up the stairs to his room without his sister getting her eyes on it. He should have known better. Alice got her eyes on everything. "Now what have you gone and thrown your money away on?" she said, coming into the hall just as he closed the front door.

Hubbard turned toward her resignedly. "A queegy bird," he said.

"A *queegy* bird!" The look, which he had long ago classified as "compulsive-aggressive with frustration overtones," settled upon her face, flaring her nostrils, thinning her lips, giving an odd flattening effect to her cheeks. She snatched off the cover, peered into the cage. "Well what do you know," she said. "And a crippled one at that!"

"It isn't a monster," Hubbard said. "It's just a bird. Quite a small one, in fact. It won't take up much room and I'll make sure that it doesn't bother anybody."

Alice gave him a long, cold look. "You'd better!" she said. "I can just imagine what Jack's going to say when I tell him."

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Abruptly she turned and walked away. "Supper's at six," she said over her shoulder.

He ascended the stairs slowly. He felt tired, defeated. They were right when they said that the longer you lived in space, the more remote your chances became of ever being re-accepted by society. Space was big, and in space you thought big; in space you read big books written by big men. You changed, you grew different . . . and eventually, even your relatives got to hate you.

Though God knew, you tried to be just like everybody else on the surface. You tried to say the same things everybody else said, you tried to do the same things everybody else did. You made it a point never to call anyone a "fish." But there was always the inevitable slip of the tongue, the inevitable unorthodox action, and then the staring hostile faces and finally the inevitable ostracism. You couldn't quote Schweitzer in a society that conceived of God as a rosy-cheeked philanthropist piloting a winged Cadillac. You couldn't admit to liking Wagner in a civilization addicted to cowboy operettas—

You couldn't buy a crippled queegy bird in a world that had forgotten—if indeed it had ever known—the meaning of the phrase, "reverence for life."

Twenty-five years, he thought. The best twenty-five years of my life. And all I've got to show for them are a lonely room, and a pittance of a pension that won't even let me retain my self-respect.

And yet he didn't regret the years: the slow magnificent drifting of the stars; the indescribable moment when a new planet swam into your ken, grew from a gold or green or azure mote into a sphere that eclipsed the entire cosmos. And the coming in, with the new land rising up in green greeting, singing of splendors both beautiful and terrible, of strange horizons; of civilizations undreamed of by piscine man groping his uninspired way beneath his incalculable tons of atmosphere on the deep sea bottom of Earth.

No, he didn't regret the years, no matter what their price had been. You had to pay high prices for valuable things, and if you were afraid to pay, you went destitute all your life. Spiritually destitute, intellectually destitute—

The nothingness of body and the all of mind, the pure flow of thought: the unhindered passages through the staid corridors of knowledge, the breathless sojourns in cathedrals built of phrase and word; the rare and shining moments when you glimpsed the star-patterned face of God—

Yes, and those other moments, too, the soul-shattering moments when you glimpsed, in your aloneness, the abysmal deeps of hell . . .

He shuddered. Slowly he returned to the bottom of the sea,

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found himself facing the bleak façade of his bedroom door. Reluctantly his fingers closed upon the knob, turned—

Opposite the doorway, a bookcase burst with well-worn books. To the right was the battered article of furniture which he faithfully referred to as his desk, but whose drawers held not papers nor pen nor log book, but underwear and socks and shirts and all the other bodily impedimenta that mortal man is heir to. His bed, narrow and hard the way he believed beds should be, stood like a stubborn Spartan by the window, the toes of his other shoes peeping from beneath the hem of the spread.

He set the cage on the desk and removed his hat and coat. The queegy bird, after a blue appraisal of its new surroundings, hopped lopsidedly down from its perch and went to work on one of the cups of *piwi* seeds that had been included with the cage. Hubbard watched for a while—before it occurred to him that it was impolite to watch somebody else eat, even when that somebody else was a queegy bird; then he hung his coat and hat in the closet, went down the hall to the bathroom and washed up. By the time he returned, the queegy bird had finished its repast and was regarding itself contemplatively in its mirror.

"I think it's about time for your first lesson," Hubbard said. "Let's see what you can do with Keats: *'Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know.'* "

The queegy bird regarded him obliquely with one blue eye. The seconds scampered by. "All right," Hubbard said presently, "let's try again: *'Beauty is truth—'* "

" '—truth beauty—that is all ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know!' "

Hubbard's weight settled back on his heels. The words had been uttered almost without intonation, and in a rather gravelly voice. Nevertheless, they had been precise and clear, and marked the first time in his life he had ever heard anyone—outside of another spaceman—give utterance to anything that did not directly or indirectly concern a bodily need or function. He touched his cheek a little tremulously. Why, he wondered, hadn't he thought of buying a queegy bird a long time ago?

"I think," he said, "that before we go any farther, we'd better give you a name. Suppose we make it 'Keats,' as long as we started with him. Or, better yet, 'Mr. Keats,' since we've got to establish your sex one way or another. I admit it's a rather arbitrary way of doing so, but I never thought to ask whether you were a boy bird or a girl bird."

"Keats," Mr. Keats said.

"Fine! And now we'll try a line or two from Shelley—" (In the background of his mind, Hubbard was aware of a car

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pulling into the drive, of voices in the downstairs hall; but in his absorption with Mr. Keats, he paid no attention.)

" 'Tell me, thou Star, whose wings of light
Speed thee in thy fiery flight,
In what cavern of the night
Will thy pinions close now?' "

" 'Tell me, thou Star—' " Mr. Keats began.

"Now I've really had it. A queegy bird reciting poetry!"

Reluctantly, Hubbard turned. His brother-in-law was standing in the doorway. Usually he kept his door closed. Tonight he had forgotten. "Yes," he said, "he recites poetry. Is there a law against it?"

" '—whose wings of light—' " Mr. Keats went on.

Jack shook his head. He was 35, looked 40, and thought 15. "No, there isn't," he said. "But there should be."

" 'Speed thee in thy fiery flight—' "

"I disagree," Hubbard said.

" 'In what cavern of the night—' "

"And there should also be a law against bringing them in human houses!"

" 'Will thy pinions close now . . .' "

"Are you trying to tell me that I can't keep him?"

"Not exactly. But I'm telling you to keep him far away from me! They carry germs, you know."

"So do you," Hubbard said. He didn't mean to say it, but he couldn't resist.

Jack's nostrils flared, his lips thinned, his cheeks grew flat. Odd, Hubbard reflected, how twelve years of marriage could make the physical reactions of two people identical. "Just keep it away from me, that's all! And keep it away from the kids, too. I don't want it poisoning their minds with that claptrap talk you're teaching it!"

"I'll keep it away from them, don't worry about that," Hubbard said.

"Want your door closed?"

"Yes."

Abruptly the room trembled from the impact of wood on wood. Mr. Keats nearly jumped through the bars of his cage. Hubbard headed furiously for the hall.

He never reached it. What would be the sense, he asked himself, of giving them the one excuse they needed to evict him? His pension wasn't enough to enable him to live anywhere else—unless he hit Derelict Alley—and his temperament precluded his supplementing it through employment. Sooner or later he'd betray himself to his fellow workers, just as he always did, and be railroaded or ridiculed—it didn't matter which—off the job.

Miserably, he turned away from the door. Mr. Keats had calmed down somewhat, but his pale-green breast still rose and

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fell at an accelerated rhythm. Hubbard bent over the cage. "I'm sorry, Mr. Keats," he said. "I guess birds can't afford to be different any more than humans can."

He was late for supper. Jack, Alice, and the kids were already at the table when he entered the ration room, and Jack was saying, "I'm getting damned sick of his insolence. After all, if it wasn't for me, where would he be? Derelict Alley, that's where!"

"I'll speak to him," Alice said.

"Now's as good a time as any," Hubbard said, sitting down and opening his vacuumized supper-pak.

Alice gave him the injured look she reserved for such occasions. "Jack was just telling me how rude you were to him. I think you should apologize. After all this is his house."

Hubbard was trembling inside. Usually he backed down whenever his obligations were thrown in his face. Tonight, somehow he couldn't. "I'll concede," he said, "that you've given me a room to sleep in and that you feed me, and that I'm unable to pay you enough for either service to permit you to make a profit. But such munificence hardly entitles you to a slice of my soul every time I try to preserve my dignity as a human being."

Alice looked at him blankly for a moment. Then: "No one's asking you for a slice of your soul! Why do you talk that way, Ben?"

"He talks that way because he used to be a spaceman," Jack interrupted. "That's the way they talk in space—to themselves, of course. It keeps them from going crazy—or keeps them from knowing they already are crazy!"

Nancy, who was 8, and Jimmy, who was 11, broke into simultaneousy giggles. Hubbard cut a small square of his nearsteak. The trembling in him was worse than ever. Then he thought of Mr. Keats, and the trembling went away. He looked coldly around the table. For the first time in years he was not afraid. "If the present gathering is an index to the norm," he said, "perhaps we are crazy. Thank God for that! There may be hope!"

Jack's and Alice's faces were skin-tight masks. But neither of them said a word. Supper was resumed. Hubbard seldom ate very much. He was rarely hungry.

But tonight he had an excellent appetite.

The next day was Saturday. Usually Hubbard washed Jack's car Saturday morning. Not this Saturday morning. After breakfasting, he retired to his room and spent the next three hours with Mr. Keats. Descartes, this time, and Nietzsche and Hume. Mr. Keats didn't do quite so well with pure prose, though. A phrase or two on any one sub-

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ject was about the extent of his abilities.

Apparently poetry was his forte.

In the afternoon Hubbard visited the spaceport, as was his custom, and watched the shuttle-ships come and go. The *Flame* and the *Wanderer;* the *Promise* and the *Song*. The *Promise* was his favorite. He'd surfaced on that one himself—a long time ago, it seemed now, though it wasn't really. Two or three years, maybe—no more than that. . . . Taken up equipment and personnel to the orbiting freighters and brought back Centaurian bauxite and Martian ore and Sirian chrome and all the other elements man needed to perpetuate his complex civilization.

Piloting a shuttle-ship was a sort of prelude to piloting a freighter. It gave you a chance to find out whether you could take that awesome moment when you emerged from the depths and rode free on the star-isled sea of space. If you could take it, and could continue to take it, you were eligible for the big boats and the long runs.

Trouble was, when you grew older, your personal universe shrank, no matter what you did to stop it, and the aloneness of the long runs grew with you; grew to a point where even the corridors of knowledge and the cathedrals built of phrase and word no longer helped, grew till you psychoed out once too many times and were given the plank —consigned forever to the bottom of the sea. If piloting a freighter had been an operation complex enough to occupy your time, instead of a long and lonely vigil in a cockpit filled with self-operating controls and nothing else, or if Interstellar and the other space transportation outfits did not have to operate on so slender a margin of profit that payloads had to be computed down to the last pound, the situation might have been different.

If, Hubbard thought, standing in the snow outside the spaceport fence. If, he thought, watching the ships come in, watching the huge mobile docks trundle over to the pads and fill their ravenous bins with ore and bauxite and magnesium. If, he thought, watching the ships climb up beyond the blue where the freighters orbited on the soundless surface of the sea . . .

When the afternoon shadows lengthened and the daylight began to dwindle, he debated, as usual, on whether to stop in and see McCaffrey, the port operations chief. As usual, and for the same reason, he decided not to. It was the same reason that made him avoid the company of other ex-spacemen like himself: the nostalgia such meetings evoked was too poignant for him to bear.

He turned away, walked along the fence to the gate, and, when the airbus came in, boarded it and went home.

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March came, and winter blended into spring. Rains washed the snow away; gutters churned with muddy water, and lawns took on a naked look. The first robins began to appear.

Hubbard rigged up a perch for Mr. Keats in front of the bedroom window. Mr. Keats would sit there all day, flying back to his cage every now and then for a snack of *piwi* seeds. He liked the mornings best of all, the mornings with the sun breasting the rooftop of the house next door, all bright and golden, and when the brightness struck the window and washed all through the room, he would fly in swift ecstatic figure-eights and loops and spirals, chirping at the top of his voice, returning to his perch and miraculously re-alighting on one foot: a golden mote, winged and living, a part of the sun itself, a part of the morning; a feathered exclamation point emphasizing each new beauty the day divulged.

Under Hubbard's tutelage, his repertoire grew and grew. The most casual remark was bound to contain at least one association word capable of provoking a reaction, and the resultant quotation would range anywhere from Juvenal to Joyce, from Rousseau to Russell, or from Euripides to Eliot. He had a penchant for the first two lines of "Dover Beach," and often would recite them without any provocation at all.

During this period, Hubbard's sister and brother-in-law left him pretty much alone. They did not even remark about his shirking his Saturday morning carwash job, nor even so much as mention Mr. Keats. Hubbard wasn't fooled. They were waiting, and he knew it: waiting till he gave them whatever opportunity they were looking for, waiting till he turned his back at the right moment—

He wasn't particularly surprised when he returned from the spaceport one Saturday afternoon and found Mr. Keats huddled forlornly in the corner of his cage, his feathers fluffed up, his blue eyes glazed with fear.

Later, at the supper table, he saw the cat lurking in the shadows of the ration room. But he said nothing. The cat was a psychological weapon: if your landlord permitted you to keep one species of pet, you could hardly object to his keeping a different species. Instead, Hubbard had bought a new lock for his bedroom door and installed it himself. Then he bought a new catch for the window, and made sure that whenever he left the room, both means of ingress were securely fastened.

He sat back to wait for their next maneuver.

He didn't have to wait long. This time they didn't have to contrive a means for getting rid of Mr. Keats: one was thrown right in their laps.

Hubbard came down to supper

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one night and the minute he saw their faces, he knew. Even the kids showed it—not so much in the way they looked at him as in the way they kept looking away from him. The newspaper clipping Jack shoved under his nose was almost an anticlimax:

Queegy Bird Fever Strikes Family of Five

Deetville, Mo., March 28, 2043 —Dr. Otis Q. Farnham today diagnosed the illness which simultaneously afflicted Mr. and Mrs. Fred Krudlow and their three children, as queegy bird fever.

Recently, Mrs. Krudlow purchased a pair of queegy birds at the local five and ten dollar store. Several days ago, the entire Krudlow family began complaining of sore throats and aching limbs, and Dr. Farnham was called.

"The fact that queegy bird fever is not a great deal more serious than the common cold should not affect our attitude towards this totally unnecessary disease," Dr. Farnham said, in a prepared statement. "I have long deplored the unsupervised sale of these extra-terrestrial bird forms, and I intend, immediately, to recommend to the WMA, a thorough examination of all birds being brought in from Venus, all birds now in department and five and ten dollar stores, as well as all birds already purchased and living in households throughout the world. They serve no useful purpose, and Earth will be better off without them."

Hubbard's eyes trailed away from the clipping, rested unseeingly on the table. In the back of his mind, Mr. Keats gave a despairing peep.

Jack was beaming. "I told you they carried germs," he said.

"So does Dr. Farnham," Hubbard said.

"Why what an awful thing to say," Alice said. "What germs could a *doctor* carry?"

"The same germs all pompous and opportunistic people carry —the virii 'publicity-hunger,' 'ill-considered action,' and 'xenophobia,' to name a few. . . . He'll do anything to get out of his provincial rut. He'll exterminate every queegy bird in the system if he has to."

"You're not going to talk your way out of this one," Jack said. "That article says as clear as day that queegy birds are dangerous to have around."

"So are cats and dogs. . . . So are automobiles. If you read about a traffic accident occurring in Deetville, Missouri, would you get rid of your car?"

"You leave my car out of this!" Jack shouted. "And you get that damned bird out of here by tomorrow morning or get out yourself!"

Alice touched his arm. "Jack—"

"Shut up! I've had enough of his high-falutin' talk. Just be-

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cause he was a spaceman once, he thinks he's better than we are. He looks down on us because we stay on Earth." He confronted Hubbard, pointing at him with his finger. "All right, tell me this, then, you're so smart! Just how long do you think there'd *be* spacemen if there wasn't people like us staying here on Earth to consume and use what you bring back from your damned planets? Why, if it wasn't for the consumer there wouldn't be a ship in the whole sky. There wouldn't even be a civilization!"

Hubbard looked at him for a long time. Finally he got up and said the one word he had promised himself he would never say to an Earth-bound mortal; the ultimate epithet, in space argot, whose esoteric meaning was forever lost to the purblind creatures of the deep—

"Fish!" he said, and turned and left the room.

His hands were trembling when he reached the top of the stairs. He waited in the hall till they steadied. It would never do to let Mr. Keats see how upset he was—

He censored the thought. You could carry anthropomorphism too far. No matter how human Mr. Keats might seem to be, he was still nothing but a bird. He could talk, and he had a personality, and he had his likes and his dislikes; but he wasn't human.

Well, then, was Jack human?

Was Alice?

Were the kids?

Well . . . Certainly.

Why, then, was Mr. Keats' company preferable to theirs?

Because Alice and Jack and the kids lived in a different world, a world Hubbard had left behind a long time ago and to which he could never return. Mr. Keats didn't belong in that world, either. He was a fellow outcast. Moreover, he was a fellow outcast capable of supplying the one thing human beings needed most:

Companionship.

And he only weighed one and one-quarter ounces . . .

Hubbard had just reached his door and was fitting the new key into the new lock, when the thought struck him and washed through him like clear, cold wine. Abruptly his hands began trembling again.

This time he didn't notice.

"Sit down, Hub," McCaffrey said. "Haven't seen you for millennia."

The long walk across the starlit tarmac and the long wait in the crowded anteroom, with the frosted door gleaming coldly in the foreground, had honeycombed his confidence. But McCaffrey was an old friend. If anybody could understand, McCaffrey could. If anybody would help, McCaffrey would—

Hubbard sat down. "I won't waste your time with a lot of irrelevant words, Mac," he said. "I want to go out again."

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McCaffrey had a pencil between his fingers. He let the point fall to the desktop and the graphite tip made a brief series of taps on the azure formica. "I guess I don't need to tell you that you're 45, that you've already psychoed out more than the critical number of times, and that if you got up there and psychoed out again, you'd lose your life and I'd lose my job."

"No, you don't have to tell me," Hubbard said . . . "You've known me for twenty years, Mac. Do you think I'd ask to go out if I didn't think I had a good chance of making it back?"

McCaffrey raised the pencil, let it fall again. The series of taps hung in the air long after the point had ceased vibrating. "Why do you think you've got a chance?"

"If I don't psycho, I'll tell you afterwards. If I do psycho, you tell them I stole the ship. You can fix it easy."

"I can fix everything easy—except my conscience."

"What does it do to your conscience looking across your desk at me now, Mac?"

The pencil fell again. Da — da — da — da — da — da-da-dadada . . .

"They tell me you own stock in Interstellar, Mac."

Da — da — da — da — da—da-dadadada . . .

"I left part of my soul in Interstellar. That means you own stock in me."

Da — da — da — da — da—da-dadadada . . .

"I know that one or two hundred pounds can spell the difference between profit and loss. I'm not blaming you for that, Mac. And I know that pilots are a dime a dozen. You don't need much technical training to learn how to push buttons. But even so, think of the money Interstellar could save over a period of time if they could use a man for forty years instead of twenty."

"You'd be able to tell right away," McCaffrey said reflectively . . . "The minute you surfaced."

"That's right. In five minutes I'd know, one way or the other. In half an hour, you'd know."

"There's a run open on the *Promise* . . ." Abruptly McCaffrey made up his mind. "Be here at 0600 tomorrow morning," he said. "On the dot."

Hubbard stood up. He touched his cheek and his finger came away wet. "Thanks, Mac. I'll never forget it."

"You hadn't better, you old buzzard! And you'd better get back here whole or I won't be able to live with myself for the rest of my life!"

"Be seeing you, Mac."

Hubbard let himself out. There was so much to do before 0600. A special box to make, a final talk with Mr. Keats . . .

Lord, it had been so long since he'd risen at dawn. You forgot the watermelon color of the eastern sky, the slow, cool, magnificent influx of light over the land. You forgot all the good

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things, over the years; you only thought you remembered them. You had to live them again to realize what you'd lost.

It was 0545 when the airbus set him down before the spaceport gate. The gateman was new, and didn't know him. At Hubbard's request, he called Mac. Presently he waved Hubbard in. Hubbard started the long walk across the tarmac, trying not to look at the tall spires of the shuttle ships standing like fairy castles against the citron sky. His space fatigues felt unnatural, after all the years, and he walked awkwardly in his heavy spaceboots. He kept his hands nestled deep in the voluminous pockets of his jacket.

Mac was standing on the edge of the *Promise*'s launching pad. "You'll rendezvous with the *Canaveral* at 0609," he said. That was all he said. There was nothing else to say.

The rungs of the ladder were numbingly cold. They seemed to go on and on forever. No, not quite forever. He stepped winded, into the lock. He waved to Mac. He closed the outer door, stepped into the cramped control room. He closed the inner door. He sat down on the pilot's seat and strapped himself in. He took the perforated box out of his jacket pocket. He took Mr. Keats out of the box. He checked the tiny acceleration couch, then he put Mr. Keats back in the box, on the couch, and adjusted the small straps about the small bird-body. "The stars are calling, Mr. Keats," he said.

He activated the "all-clear" signal. Presently the tower technician began the countdown. 10 . . . Numbers, Hubbard thought . . . 9 . . . It was like counting the years . . . 8 . . . counting the years backwards . . . 7 . . . The lonely, starless years . . . 6 . . . *Tell me, thou Star* . . . 5 . . . *whose wings of light* . . . 4 . . . *Speed thee in thy fiery flight* . . . 3 . . . *In what cavern of the night* . . . 2 . . . *Will thy pinions close now* . . . 1 . . .

And now you knew it in the flattened hugeness of your ponderous body and in the swift upthrusting of the jets; now you knew it in the nausea in your stomach and in the first fingers of fright clawing tentatively in your brain; now you knew it in darkening of the viewport and in the first stabbing light of the stars—

Abruptly the *Promise* emerged from the depths and floated, bereft of apparent motion, on the surface of the sea of space. In the vast distances the stars shone like brilliant buoys, lighting the way to unimaginable shores . . .

There was a slight tremor as the artificial gravity unit murmured into life. Hubbard knew normalcy again. Looking through the viewport, he knew fear. Alone, he thought. Alone on the sea of space. He felt his fingers at his collar, tearing at the tightness and the swelling

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terror. *Alone.* The word was a white lance of pure panic imbedding itself deeper and deeper into his brain. ALONE. Say it, his mind shrieked. Say it! His fingers dropped away from his collar, down to the box on his lap, and fumbled with the tiny straps. *Say it!*

"Alone," he croaked.

"You are not alone," Mr. Keats said, hopping up from the little couch and perching on the rim of the box. "*I* am with you."

And slowly, excruciatingly, the white lance withdrew.

Mr. Keats flew over and perched on a quadrant vane in front of the viewport. He cast one bright blue bead of an eye at the cosmos. He ruffled his feathers. "'*I think, therefore I am,*'" he said. "'*Cogito ergo sum.*'"

THE END

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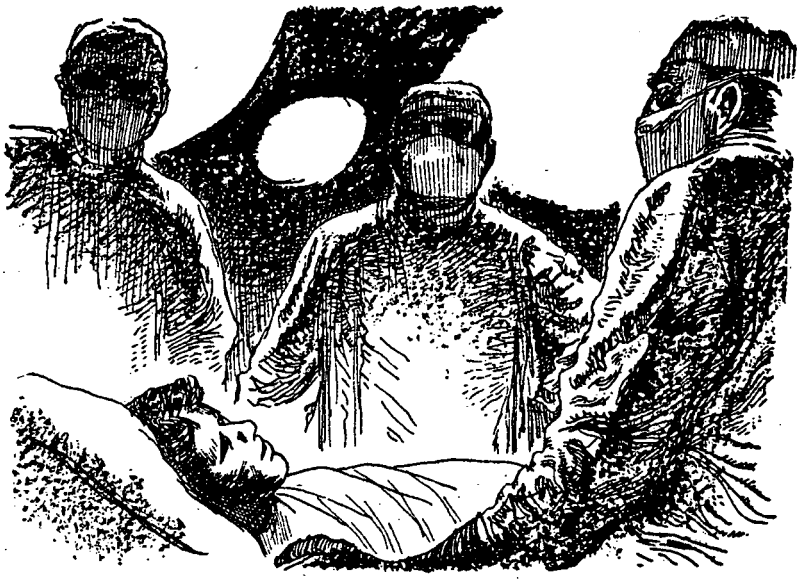

IF THE RED SLAYER

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

Death is not the ultimate horror in this war. On the contrary.

I WON'T even try to describe the pain. I'll just say that it was unbearable even with anesthetics, and that I bore it because I didn't have any choice.

Then it faded away and I opened my eyes and looked into the faces of the brahmins standing over me. There were three of them, dressed in the usual white

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operating gowns and white gauze masks. They say they wear those masks to keep germs out of us. But every soldier knows they wear them so we can't recognize them.

I was still doped up to the ears on anesthetics, and only chunks and bits of my memory were functioning. I asked, "How long was I dead?"

"About ten hours," one of the brahmins told me.

"How did I die?"

"Don't you remember?" the tallest brahmin asked.

"Not yet."

"Well," the tallest brahmin said, "you were with your platoon in Trench 2645B-4. At dawn your entire company made a frontal attack, trying to capture the next trench. Number 2645B-5."

"And what happened?" I asked.

"You stopped a couple of machine gun bullets. The new kind with the shock heads. Remember now? You took one in the chest and three more in the legs. When the medics found you, you were dead."

"Did we capture the trench?" I asked.

"No. Not this time."

"I see." My memory was returning rapidly as the anasthetic wore off. I remembered the boys in my platoon. I remembered our trench. Old 2645B-4 had been my home for over a year, and it was pretty nice as trenches go. The enemy had been trying to capture it, and our dawn assault had been a counter-attack, really. I remembered the machine gun bullets tearing me into shreds, and the wonderful relief I had felt when they did. And I remembered something else too . . .

I sat upright. "Hey, just a minute!" I said.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought eight hours was the upper limit for bringing a man back to life."

"We've improved our techniques since then," one of the brahmins told me. "We're improving them all the time. Twelve hours is the upper limit now, just as long as there isn't serious brain damage."

"Good for you," I said. Now my memory had returned completely, and I realized what had happened. "However, you made a serious mistake in bringing *me* back."

"What's the beef, soldier?" one of them asked in that voice only officers get.

"Read my dogtags," I said.

He read them. His forehead, which was all I could see of his face, became wrinkled. He said, "This *is* unusual!"

"Unusual!" I said.

"You see," he told me, "you were in a whole trench full of dead men. We were told they were all first-timers. Our orders were to bring the whole batch back to life."

"And you didn't read any dogtags first?"

"We were overworked. There

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wasn't time. I really am sorry, Private. If I'd known—"

"To hell with that," I said. "I want to see the Inspector General."

"Do you really think—"

"Yes I do," I said. "I'm no trench lawyer, but I've got a real beef. It's my right to see the I.G."

They went into a whispered conference, and I looked myself over. The brahmins had done a pretty good job on me. Not as good as they did in the first years of the war, of course. The skin grafts were sloppier now, and I felt a little scrambled inside. Also my right arm was about two inches longer than the left; bad joiner-work. Still, it was a pretty good job.

The brahmins came out of their conference and gave me my clothes. I dressed. "Now, about the Inspector General," one of them said. "That's a little difficult right now. You see—"

Needless to say, I didn't see the I.G. They took me to see a big, beefy, kindly old Master Sergeant. One of those understanding types who talks to you and makes everything all right. Except that I wasn't having any.

"Now, now, Private," the kindly old sarge said. "What's this I hear about you kicking up a fuss about being brought back to life?"

"You heard correct," I said. "Even a private soldier has his rights under the Articles of War. Or so I've been told."

"He certainly does," said the kindly old sarge.

"I've done my duty," I said. "Seventeen years in the army, eight years in combat. Three times killed, three times brought back. The orders read that you can requisition death after the third time. That's what I did, and it's stamped on my dogtags. But I wasn't *left* dead. Those damned medics brought me back to life again, and it isn't fair. I want to stay dead."

"It's much better staying alive," the sarge said. "Alive, you always have a chance of being rotated back to non-combat duties. Rotation isn't working very fast on account of the manpower shortage. But there's still a chance."

"I know," I said. "But I think I'd just as soon stay dead."

"I think I could promise you that in six months or so—"

"I want to stay dead," I said firmly. "After the third time, it's my privilege under the Articles of War."

"Of course it is," the kindly old sarge said, smiling at me, one soldier to another. "But mistakes happen in wartime. Especially in a war like this." He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. "I remember when the thing started. It sure looked like a pushbutton affair when it started. But both us and the Reds had a full arsenal of anti-missile-missiles, and that pretty well deadlocked the atomic stuff. The invention of the atomic damper clinched it.

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That made it a real infantry affair."

"I know, I know."

"But our enemies outnumbered us," the kindly old sarge said. "They still do. All those millions and millions of Russians and Chinese! We had to have more fighting men. We had to at least hold our own. That's why the medics started reviving the dead."

"I know all this. Look, Sarge, I want us to win. I want it bad. I've been a good soldier. But I've been killed three times, and—"

"The trouble is," the sarge said, "the Reds are reviving their dead, too. The struggle for manpower in the front lines is crucial *right now*. The next few months will tell the tale, one way or the other. So why not forget about all this? The next time you're killed, I can promise you'll be left alone. So let's overlook it this time."

"I want to see the Inspector General," I said.

"All right, Private," the kindly old sarge said, in a not very friendly tone. "Go to Room 303."

I went to 303, which was an outer office, and I waited. I was feeling sort of guilty about all the fuss I was kicking up. After all, there was a war on. But I was angry, too. A soldier has his rights, even in a war. Those damned brahmins . . .

It's funny how they got that name. They're just medics, not Hindus or Brahmins or anything like that. They got the name because of a newspaper article a couple years ago, when all this was new. The guy who wrote the article told about how the medics could revive dead men now, and make them combat-worthy. It was pretty hot stuff then. The writer quoted a poem by Emerson. The poem starts out—

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
  Or if the slain thinks he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
  I keep, and pass, and turn again.

That's how things were. You could never know, when you killed a man, whether he'd stay dead, or be back in the trenches shooting at you the next day. And you didn't know whether you'd stay dead or not if you got killed. Emerson's poem was called "Brahma," so our medics got to be called brahmins.

Being brought back to life wasn't bad at first. Even with the pain, it was good to be alive. But you finally reach a time when you get tired of being killed and brought back and killed and brought back. You start wondering how many deaths you owe your country, and if it might not be nice and restful staying dead a while. You look forward to the long sleep.

The authorities understood this. Being brought back too often was bad for morale. So they

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set three revivals as the limit. After the third time you could choose rotation or permanent death. The authorities preferred you to choose death; a man who's been dead three times has a very bad effect on the morale of civilians. And most combat soldiers preferred to stay dead after the third time.

But I'd been cheated. I had been brought back to life for the fourth time. I'm as patriotic as the next man, but this I wasn't going to stand for.

At last I was allowed to see the Inspector-General's adjutant. He was a colonel, a thin, gray no-nonsense type. He'd already been briefed on my case, and he wasted no time on me. It was a short interview.

"Private," he said, "I'm sorry about this, but new orders have been issued. The Reds have increased their rebirth rate, and we have to match them. The standing order now is six revivals before retirement."

"But that order hadn't been issued at the time I was killed."

"It's retroactive," He said. "You have two deaths to go. Good-bye and good luck, Private."

And that was it. I should have known you can't get anywhere with top brass. They don't know how things are. They rarely get killed more than once, and they just don't understand how a man feels after four times. So I went back to my trench.

I walked back slowly, past the poisoned barbed wire, thinking hard. I walked past something covered with a khaki tarpaulin stenciled *Secret Weapon.* Our sector is filled with secret weapons. They come out about once a week, and maybe one of them will win the war.

But right now I didn't care. I was thinking about the next stanza of that Emerson poem. It goes:

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

Old Emerson got it pretty right, because that's how it is after your fourth death. Nothing makes any difference, and everything seems pretty much the same. Don't get me wrong, I'm no cynic. I'm just saying that a man's viewpoint is bound to change after he's died four times.

At last I reached good old Trench 2645B-4, and greeted all the boys. I found out we were attacking again at dawn. I was still thinking.

I'm no quitter, but I figured four times dead was enough. In this attack, I decided I'd make sure I stayed dead. There would be no mistakes this time.

We moved out at first light, past the barbed wire and the rolling mines, into the no-man's-land between our trench and

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2645B-5. This attack was being carried out in battalion strength, and we were all armed with the new homing bullets. We moved along pretty briskly for a while. Then the enemy really opened up.

We kept on gaining ground. Stuff was blowing up all around me, but I hadn't a scratch yet. I started to think we would make it this time. Maybe I wouldn't get killed.

Then I got it. An explosive bullet through the chest. Definitely a mortal wound. Usually after something like that hits you, you stay down. But not me. I wanted to make sure of staying dead this time. So I picked myself up and staggered forward, using my rifle as a crutch. I made another fifteen yards in the face of the damnedest crossfire you've ever seen. Then I got it, and got it right. There was no mistaking it on this round.

I felt the explosive bullet slam into my forehead. There was the tiniest fraction of a second in which I could feel my brains boiling out, and I knew I was safe this time. The brahmins couldn't do anything about serious head injuries, and mine was really serious.

Then I died.

I recovered consciousness and looked up at the brahmins in their white gowns and gauze masks.

"How long was I dead?" I asked.

"Two hours."

Then I remembered. "But I got it in the head!"

The gauze masks wrinkled, and I knew they were grinning. "Secret weapon," one of them told me. "It's been in the works for close to three years. At last we and the engineers perfected a de-scrambler. Tremendous invention!"

"Yeah?" I said.

"At last medical science can treat serious head injuries," the brahmin told me. "Or any other kind of injury. We can bring any man back now, just as long as we can collect seventy percent of his pieces and feed them to the de-scrambler. This is really going to cut down our losses. It may turn the tide of the whole war!"

"That's fine," I said.

"By the way," the brahmin told me, "you've been awarded a medal for your heroic advance under fire after receiving a mortal wound."

"That's nice," I said. "Did we take 2645B-5?"

"We took it this time. We're massing for an assault against Trench 2645B-6."

I nodded, and in a little while I was given my clothes and sent back to the front. Things have quieted down now, and I must admit it's kind of pleasant to be alive. Still, I think I've had all I want of it.

Now I've got just one more death to go before I'll have my six.

If they don't change the orders again. **THE END**

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PHANTOM FOOT

By PHYLLIS GOTLIEB

The line between reality and illusion is never clear. But in the wardroom, sweating, the men of the starship waited for the Qumedni to show them which was which.

PHELPS was in the dayroom watching Beal and Twelvetrees playing *blitz*, a roughhouse performed in a six-foot chalked circle, crouching in the sumo position, but with pronged fingers aimed and darting. It was stuffy, and suddenly their grunts and jibes, their glistening shoulders and the clang and shuffle of heavy boots on steel plates oppressed Phelps and he turned away and reached up for a stereo reel. There was a gasp and thud and when he turned around Twelvetrees was doubled up on

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the floor, choking, most of his body well outside the circle. Beal gaped and shuddered, pulling deep breaths and rubbing sweaty hands on his chest.

"Pay up, boy, I got you square."

"Hell with you." Twelvetrees bent over his doubled arms, winded and nauseated.

"Sell your butterfly collection," Beal snickered. "Borrow from Towser!" He roared with laughter that broke and redoubled from the metal walls. Phelps rubbed his leg and wished he were elsewhere, wished there were a big enough elsewhere on this cramped ship to give him privacy and silence for his ravaged body and nerves. His fear.

Beal turned. His glance touched contemptuously on Phelps for an instant, then passed and rested on Dionisi, who had accommodated his shoulders to the corner of the room and was drawing the last sustenance from a mangled cigarette butt.

"Come on, Kos! Play the winner."

Dionisi took the butt out of his mouth and said, "No thanks, I don't like your style." He glanced covertly at Phelps and dropped the butt down the airsuck. Phelps parted his lips to rap out in his best voice: "You are aware, Dionisi, that Regulation 86/493a expressly forbids—" but he recollected what and where he was and kept silent.

Beal's eyes narrowed. "And you're supposed to be such a hotshot! You weren't so particular when you knifed Halloran in the sweepstake on the *Nicholas of Cusa.*"

Dionisi fished out a cigarette. "You are mistaken. He pulled a knife on me. I killed him with my hands. And got suspended for it."

Beal said, "He ain't around to talk about it, and you got plenty of money out of that deal." A springknife flicked its blade out of his closed hand. "I think you ought to play blitz with me, Kos."

Phelps found his voice. "Stop it, Beal, put it away before it gets bent. We're going into orbit in an hour and we need Dionisi."

Kosta Dionisi grinned. "Yes, Beal, I am a very valuable member of the crew."

"Yeah," Beal stowed his knife away, "an you'll make as pretty a lookin' deader as the rest of us." He tossed Twelvetrees a shirt and buttoned on his own. Turning, he found his target in Phelps. "You're pale, Joe. You're shakin' like a leaf. What in hell's name made you volunteer?"

"I didn't," said Phelps. "I didn't volunteer at all." He limped out of the room, and when he was in the passageway with the door closed behind him he leaned weakly against the wall.

The *Cayley & Sylvester* went into orbit. Like a yoyo going round-the-world it wheeled, centering on the planet Qumedon and waiting.

Towers faced Phelps across the *go*-board in his cabin. The board was a magnetic slab with black and white metallic stones.

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Towers was a 7th Class player, but he was not in the dedicated mood necessary for spending two or three days over a game. He doubted he would be alive that long. He faced Phelps wishing he had something more than empathetic feeling for this thin-lipped, white-lashed shadow. He had been against taking him on with the crew, but in such a small ship there was no other arrangement possible; he could think of half-a-dozen thick-headed louts who could have done the work better and perhaps proven more useful in the end. But the choice had been made for him.

The ship's chronometer said that the time was 1934 hours, on the 59th day out. The ship had been in orbit for two hours.

Towers said, "That means we have anywhere up to twelve hours."

"Anywhere at all," said Phelps, retracting his last move.

Towers was annoyed, but there was nothing to do but wait, and nothing mattered. To conceal his annoyance he pulled a turnip-shaped chronometer out of his pocket and studied it. "Five-ten p.m. Earth-EST," he said. "My four kids are sitting in a row in front of the TV watching *Jett Winslow of the Solar Patrol* and wishing they were out fighting ten-legged Vegans."

"I haven't even that," said Phelps. Towers sighed, and fished his mind in vain to find something worthwhile in himself, his work, his mission,—and Phelps. The veined hands, pale blue eyes, pale-red hair cut close to the scalp, all seemed compounded of raw flayed nerve. At home he might well have been at ease as a stalker of errors in a roomful of IBM machines. As a conscript on the *Cayley & Sylvester*, sunk in apathy and self-pity and yet the only survivor of contact with the Qumedni — Towers would have preferred the company of Beal and Twelvetrees, whom he considered worthless in any other context.

Air pulsed, refreshing itself, through the arteries of the ship with a faint but pervasive noise; the magnetic board pulled at the descending stones with an unpleasant snick; Phelps rubbed his leg and a roughness in his fingers rasped on his trouser-leg. A flaw in the airconditioning which Towers had cursed a thousand times pulled in rowdy voices from the messroom in one of the endless variations of the Battle Hymn of the Republic:

"She went into the water and she
got her thighs all wet,
But she didn't get her (clap,
clap) wet, yet!"

Yet he would not have told them to shut up.

The intercom buzzed. Towers glanced at Phelps. Aside from Dionisi, up with the instruments, there was no-one else but the voices and their muffled bellowing. He pressed a button.

"Dionisi?"

"They—it's here, sir."

Towers thought the voice

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trembled. "Exactly what are you trying to tell me, Dionisi?" He spoke softly; he was called Towser because of his bite.

"The Qumedni ship is pacing us, sir—just as Phelps described it." He gave the co-ordinates in a calmer voice.

"Stay on autopilot and come down here in ten minutes," said Towers. "Bring the others."

He turned: "You're sure now we have a little time, half an hour at least?"

Phelps twisted in his chair. "Two hours, more like." The voices in the messroom stopped, leaving a gaping hole of silence beyond the other noises.

"Leg bother you?" Towers asked, to fill the emptiness with the sense of familiar human kind.

"No more than usual. Nerves. I get, you know, the feel of the foot . . . I had a sore gall under one ankle . . ." He brushed a beading of sweat from his upper lip.

"Why don't you take it off? You won't get much of a chance . . ." He cleared away the *go*-set while Phelps loosened his laces.

"I don't like—" he began.

"Don't worry, just go ahead." Towers gave him a brief, rare grin, then he caught sight of the chronometer. At home it was 5.29, and on TV red, green, and yellow Chucklies were popping musically in the cereal bowl. He crammed the turnip in his pocket and yanked levers that did away with the bunk, washstand, and table. Phelps pulled off his shoe and the aluminum foot inside it and rubbed his leg in its white stump sock, marked with the constrictions of the laces.

"Here come the sentences," said Towers.

There were four tense faces in front of him. The crew knew almost as much as Towers; there was not much to know. The spread of information had not been encouraged, though there had been rumors of sealed orders. Towers himself had not been inclined to batter Phelps with questions.

Now he said, "You know we were sent here to contact the Qumedni and that three ships were lost trying."

They shifted uneasily.

"Nobody's ever said what happened to them ships," said Beal. "Sir?"

"They blew up," said Towers matter of factly.

Beal screwed his eyes up and pawed his bristled cheek. "But if we gotta fight—we ain't armed. Sir? How can you expect—"

"The Qumedni don't attack with guns," said Phelps.

Three pairs of eyes turned toward him. "There's your sealed orders," said Towers. "If there's anything you want to know, ask Phelps. He's the only one alive who knows anything about the Qumedni."

They were too far gone in familiarity to assume respect at this point; Dionisi said, "If it is so difficult how have you gotten all of this information?"

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"I was the captain of the third ship," said Phelps.

"A thousand years ago a Qumedni ship crashed on Bellisarius VI. The crew died but the log and a couple of other records had been stored in a kind of safe and were found almost intact. The Bellisarii had never been contacted by them before, and it was believed they meant to stop for repairs and try to leave without being seen. This story was dug up about twenty-five years ago by one of our expeditions, but we weren't the first to try to visit the Qumedni."

"What've they got that we want?" asked Twelvetrees.

"Technology. Of course you can't get much technology from a simple record like a log-book, but the account of places visited and distances covered is unbelievable. They've gotten out of the super-galaxy—perhaps even into other dimensions. Peoples of far greater technical development than ours have tried to establish relationships with them, but they have all been held at arms' length, as we are now. They seem to want to keep to themselves."

There were many times in his twenty years with the Service when Towers had felt that the planetary peoples touched by Earth ought to have been allowed to keep to themselves; and this was damned well one of them. But it was not a thought to speak aloud.

Dionisi said suddenly, "I think we have nothing they want."

"That's a point," said Phelps. "It'd be damned hard to establish a trading basis. But contact comes first. There's no room for one of the usual formal contacts; here we've got to play it as it comes."

"What do they look like?" asked Beal.

Phelps shook his head. "From what we've been able to gather they've got the arrangement fairly common in intelligent forms: a head with senses, prehensile limbs. They live in an oxygen atmosphere so they probably don't look like octopuses, but whether they've got six legs and fur like a bear, or warts like a toad, we just don't know. But they are telepathic—and they have other psi powers." He paused, and his face became drawn. "Their whole world—they have a kind of corporate awareness, each person a member cell. They have, also, a cruel humor."

"Killing people is not humor," said Dionisi.

"It is certainly not," said Phelps, staring him full in the face. Dionisi flushed.

Towers said, "You'd think that if they were so sensitive that itself would preclude cruelty of any kind."

"When I was being put through Psych — afterwards — they said that degree of empathy could kill off a race in two generations. Corporate awareness doesn't mean they give a damn for any one individual's troubles." Phelps regarded the blank faces of the crew members.

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"Their coarseness is a kind of tranquilizer that lets them register the pain without being disturbed by it. That's why it's their technology we're worrying about, and not their art or their philosophy." He rubbed his stumped leg and tucked it under the whole one.

"Now I'll tell you what happens. They pace a ship, as they're doing now, and send out telepathic feelers. They play a few table-rapping tricks to get us off guard, then they probe and find out what makes us tick." He shrugged. "Nobody's ever lasted past that."

"But if you say they don't attack," said Beal, "how did the ships—"

Phelps read the faces carefully. "The men blew up the ships themselves."

Impassive, Dionisi poured out a round of coffee from the pot on the desk.

"That's why we haven't got weapons," said Towers. "Reduces the possible." He himself had never been able to gather from Phelps what those possibles were, what form the madness would take to make men blow up their ship.

"Nerves," said Phelps; his eyes became vague. "They seem to pick at the weakness . . ."

The men twisted in their chairs, rustled their dry palms together in the silence to make sounds and senses fortified by ancient and recognizable laws. Phelps pulled himself together.

"When we were going through all that, something . . . went wrong with the reactor. The others were—weren't in any condition to go in after it, so I got into an all-purpose suit to have a go at it myself, but soon as I got the suit on the ship blew up. I was blown clear, but a piece of the hull sheared my foot off. The suit sealed it and I radioed—they found me two days later. That's it." His flat dry voice broke off like a biscuit, and he leaned back, licking his lips.

"Time for one more question, not too long," said Towers. "Anybody?"

"I have a short one," said Dionisi. He turned slate eyes toward the captain. "Out of those volunteers, why did you choose us, particularly, sir?"

Towers hesitated. Dionisi was the best pilot he had ever known, but what was more, a person who held a very strong and simple view of a world which had never treated him kindly: life was hell, but it was not necessary to behave like a devil. Towers felt that was as strong a protection as anybody could wish for this task. He had chosen Beal and Twelvetrees because they were a pair of roving mohawks with thick wits and superb reflexes. But while he was puzzling over what to say aloud, he was spared the trouble, because the lights went out.

"Just sit tight," said Phelps tensely. Twelvetrees cackled, "Quick, Harry, the weejie board!" and there was a murmur of laughter. Then the lights went

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on again and they looked at each other. They waited like a man in a dentist's chair watching the dentist's hand hovering over a row of drills. The papers on Towers' desk began a rise and stir, eddied once like leaves and settled in their accustomed places. The Qumedon force ransacked the place lightly, touching and turning the properties as though it were searching for a map or key.

And all at once there was nothing.

It was the night before take-off. Dionisi took a woman up a hill under a red August moon that hung over ripe fields. At the foot of the hill the mist was so thick it broke against their lips in invisible droplets. But they scrambled up hand in hand by chance footholds, and at the top it was clear. The fields spread out around them broken by thickets of fir that turned ghost under the shifting mist. He set out his coat and they sat on it. After he had kissed her she laid the flat of the hand on his chest and he could feel his heart plunging against it. His heartbeat, he thought, was more articulate than his tongue. Her hand moved to his face.

"Don't go, Kos. Not now when things are like this. You mustn't leave me. Stay here."

"But I will come back; I always come."

But she shook her head, shivering and clasping her arms. "I'm frightened."

"You're cold," he said. And covered her with his body.

On the night before take-off Beal was lying on the bed in a cheap hotel room. Under the bed there was a pile of whiskey bottles that spilled out against his shoes and the clothes he had dumped on the floor; there was only the miasmic light from a parchment-shaded lamp in a porcelain wall bracket. He was conscious, but paralyzed with drink, and every once in a while his consciousness took a dip into the interior darkness, pulling all his senses reeling with it. The blinded window flickered as though there were flames encroaching against it, and he heard sirens in the street. A terror welled in his throat but he was unable to lift a finger. Presently he saw a something growing in the corner of the ceiling where the light was too feeble to reach, a smoke, a shadow under the buckled wallpaper. It grew, red and purple, writhing at times, running down in streaks like ink. Beal would have screamed, but he could hardly croak.

"I got the d.t.'s," he whispered.

The stain widened and spread; the light began to grow dim; as the room darkened the thing grew phosphorescent, the ancient glue of the wallpaper parted and cracked under the pressure. He knew that the light would go out, he knew that as it failed the paper would swell and burst, and the thing with its horrid glow would reach slimy tentacles and

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engulf him. And still he could not move.

Twelvetrees helped his mother serve supper to his four younger brothers and his three younger sisters, and gave a hand with the dishes when it was all done. He was touching those thick cracked mugs and blue-rimmed plates for perhaps the last time, but that was how it went. After the younger ones had been sent to bed his mother put on her good black dress and pinned on a hat with raveled veiling. "I'm going to church, Roger. If you go out don't forget your key."

"No, Ma."

He watched TV and leafed through a magazine for a while, then he got up and put on a leather jacket. His brother Herbert looked up reproachfully from his welter of glue-tubes and the half-completed model of the *Nicholas of Cusa*. "What's the matter?" he asked. "You so sick of our faces you can't stay around for a little while on your last night?"

Twelvetrees turned at the door. "If you were leaving the Earth and 'd probably never be back, you might want to see a little bit of it before you went, too." He closed the door on his brother's shocked face. He'd never said anything like that before, but what the hell!—it was no joke. And Herbert wouldn't tell their mother. Anyway, she always half-expected it with every trip, or thought she did. She was sure it was a deadly sin for Man to leave the earth and poke his nose in the heavens, and if the Lord had wanted Man to, etc. But as a widow with eight children she was glad to accept a good share of his pay.

Tonight there was plenty of money left to do what he wanted. He walked rapidly down toward the waterfront. Earlier there had been foghorns, and a close red sullen moon, but as the evening wore on the moon paled and receded till it stood white as salt against the basalt of the heavens. He had ridden in those heavens; he had crossed the deserts of that moon. It was a place like any other: good or bad they were the same to him. Yet it made a pretty light on the water. He stood on a bridge and watched, first the moon and then the colored lights of the dance-hall down along the curve of the shore. Those lights glittered on the water richer than the colored stars he had passed in ships. He would find a girl down there, they would drink and make love, and he would waken with the taste of the Scotch tightly coated against his palate; it was what he had to have once more. Yet he waited for a while, watching the multiple fold and flow of the moonlit water. He was very much alone.

Towers sat up quite late with his wife and four children. They stayed in the living-room watching green flames in the fireplace that were chemical, but still as warm and bright as any that had lit the arthritic passions of men

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in caves. He wanted to go to bed with his wife, and yet he wanted to see the children as long as possible, so he sat there, watching the children as they drowsed in front of the flickering light.

Then suddenly it seemed to him, perhaps by a trick of the light, that he could see his children's thoughts rising above their heads in the warm air, as heat-waves rise from half-melted asphalt on a hot day. They were simple thoughts depicted in primary colors, and mostly meretricious. He smiled at them. From the baby's rose-and-gold head came the dream of a large doll with a curly wig. One child formulated a devious plan to forestall a bully who had designs on his coptercycle. Another planned to negotiate a loan from his father, down payment on a second-hand chronometer he needed very badly to be able to tell at any given moment the exact time at any spot on Mars or Venus. Smiling, Towers turned to his wife to remark on this amazing vision; and he saw that she too had thoughts, moving in a cloud over her head. She was thinking that tomorrow night she would see her lover.

And Phelps—

Dionisi laughed. "No, no, you cannot catch me that way," he told the invisible Qumedni, and the rest of the men looked up, dazed and blinking. For a moment they swam together in the bowl of their accumulated mind, and each knew the thoughts of everyone. They laughed with him. a little stiffly, trying to orient the truth of what had happened with the twisted visions the Qumedni had tried to unbalance them with.

It seemed funny enough to Dionisi. On the night before take-off he had picked up a tramp at the corner bar; later, she had picked his pocket while he slept. He woke up neither surprised nor disappointed to find his wallet gone; it was what happened to Kosta Dionisi. He laughed: poor tramp with her handful of silver!—he had hidden his folding money and spaceman's papers under a loose tile in the shower-stall.

Beal was puzzled and insulted. He had actually celebrated his departure by rolling two drunks on Main Street as a valedictory gesture to his old home town. He had given Officer Martinez the slip, hired a Fli-Rite from the local U-Drive-it, killed a mickey on the way to the rocket port, made a perfect landing, and slept sweetly in the best hotel-room available. He didn't know what had prompted that horror—unless . . . there was an experiment he had tried when he was fifteen that—ugh!—he clasped his head in his hands.

Twelvetrees opened and closed his eyes dreamily. Neither imaginative nor guilt-ridden, he had relived his evening truly.

Towers, for a moment, fought agonizing doubt. His children's thoughts had been pictured accurately, perhaps, but his wife's? He had been married seventeen

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years, but he still considered her as beautiful a woman as he could want. In the first of those years he had tortured himself with jealousy, but the love and intimacy they had built with whatever time they had—if all those years of mutual trust were nothing— Then he smiled at a sudden memory. He had watched her face, thoughtful in the firelight and asked, "What are you thinking of?"

She grinned. "My secret lover."

"Is that all?"

"Oh, besides that, your farewell dinner. That sirloin tip—would you rather have it as an oven roast with garlic, or a pot-roast with bayleaf and cloves?"

He laughed. "Sweetheart, you just come up to bed with me now and you can make it any way you damned well please!"

And Phelps—They turned to look at him. He had not been in the pool of their thoughts, he had been outside alone somewhere. He gripped the edge of his chair, his face was spastic, contorted tightly with bared teeth, contracted brows over eyes painfully squeezed shut. Towers wondered, was he in space with the shards of his exploded ship and the pain of his sheared leg?

He called sharply, "Phelps! Come out of it!"

Phelps came out slowly, relaxing grudgingly muscle by muscle with the almost audible wrench and strain of metal cooling from white hot. As his features loosened the flesh seemed to ebb away from the bones and the skin to contract till he had the pinched nose and upper jaw that rises from the mummy's skull. His mouth worked and he blinked; he passed his hand over his head—the skin shone with sweat under the close-cropped hair. He reached down slowly, half in dream, to find the contraption that housed his stump.

"I—" he began. But just as his fingers touched the edge of the corset the foot rose up and sailed across the room, striking and rebounding from the wall with a ringing that echoed deafeningly in the stillness, and then to the opposite wall and the ceiling, clang! — corset edges flapping, and the light tatto of lace points.

"In the name of Heaven!" Phelps sat up, galvanized. The men stood and reached for it, but even though the ceiling was low it eluded them, slipped between their arms and flew, an ungainly albatross, lurching and crashing.

Towers remembered Phelps' earlier advice. "Stop! Don't go after it! Just sit tight and—" But Phelps, broken by whatever terrors had attacked him, was beyond that. Standing awkwardly on one foot, fists clenched, he cried out, "Stop it! Come back, damn you!"

The boot crashed and lurched. Phelps screamed in a high thin voice, "Give me back my foot!"

"Sit down," Towers ordered the others. He turned to Phelps: "You must stop it, man—"

"Shut up! Shut up!" Phelps

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whispered. But he sat down. Towers took a deep breath. But Phelps groped with shaking fingers for his handkerchief. He grabbed one of the polythene cups from the desk, wadded the handkerchief into it and then crammed in his stump. "Vermin!" he whispered, wincing. Then he got up and flung himself across the room, lurching more drunkenly, more crazily, than the foot he was trying to capture, shaking with the pain it cost him, shrieking in his cracking voice, "Gimme back my foot, do you hear, gimme back my foot!" There was a giggle of hysteria and someone moved to stop him. Towers' voice cut across the surge: "Stay still!" Each time the cup struck the floor they shivered. But Phelps went on yelling, "Give it back to me, give it—"

They gave him back his foot.

He stopped, choking on a sob of frightful impetus. He stood perfectly still. On the floor beside him lay the stump sock, the cup, the handkerchief. At the end of his leg there was a foot, made of flesh and bone, pink and new as a baby's. Under the outside ankle there was a small red raised lump, the gall he had complained of. He moved the toes.

All of them saw it at once, all remarked it in a second. But before the second had passed they knew something else. Each man raised his own left leg and found that there was no foot there. Sheared an inch above the ankle, it terminated in a stump, tightly bound in ridged and livid scar over the shivered protruding bone-end.

Then they knew exactly what Phelps knew, and swung alone past the stars in forty-eight hours of pain and terror; each cut nerve-end telegraphed to the empty air beyond it that here had been a foot and all its experiences, treading cool water, spring and pressure of walking, day's weariness. Singly, each man might have borne it; together, their minds balked and sank. They opened their mouths to scream, but their risen gorges silenced them. Their mindless, soundless repulsion burst from them against the sides of the confining ship with the beat-beat-beat of an eye-winged moth in a cyanide jar.

Towers lashed up his consciousness, the essential *I am* that seemed oozing down a dark drain, poured over by a freshet of panic. He forced himself through a blind torrent that made him want to break the walls of the ship and find a suffocating freedom in raw space. Eyes up, away from the surrounding horror, he saw Phelps standing solidly on his two feet as though he were frozen in a camera's exposure.

Phelps' eyes were pools of icy calm. They said: revenge. Every insult he had suffered, or thought he suffered, seemed caught there: the broken ship, the days wheeling in space, the probing indignity of Psych, the desk job for a

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ship's captain. And then two months watching the thickly rolling muscles of men playing blitz, and recoil against the interplay of hard nerveless bodies, and every coarse word from an ignorant tongue.

Towers whispered, "Phelps." But he did not know if he were heard, if sound existed or if there were any reality around him. Phelps' eyes slid back and forth around the semi-circle of gaping statues. He took two steps on his new foot and looked down at it. He licked his lips and then turned, searching for something.

"Thought you'd play with me," he muttered, to no-one. "Thought because I was crippled you could—" His head swung back and forth. Finally he found what he wanted. There was a long-necked metal decanter clasped to the wall above the desk; Towers kept it for the rare moments when self-doubt engulfed him, and now Phelps jerked it from its prongs and hefted it. He struck it against his cupped palm and it rang softly.

Towers worked his throat desperately and croaked, "For the love of Might, Phelps!" For the love of God, Montresor, bells jingled in his disordered imaginations.

Phelps smiled once; then he sat down on the floor, and raising the decanter above his head, brought it crashing down on his bare foot.

There was a black fall, as though the laws of the universe were repealed, and inseparably welded atoms dissolved. The decanter, coming down, had burned an arc of light across Towers' retina, and when he was able to see again, he found Phelps sitting on the floor, calmly smoothing the sock over his stump. There was no foot.

Towers crossed glances with the others, afraid to look down.

"Might as well," said Beal, and he looked. He found his booted foot where it belonged. Then the others dared look, and found themselves whole.

"Hell," said Twelvetrees softly. Then a new thought struck them. This might be illusion too. Dionisi raised his foot and stamped twice, ringingly, like a newly shod stallion breaking sparks in a dark smithy. After that they relaxed.

Towers picked up the decanter. It was undented. Yet when he closed his eyes he could still see the arc of light. "How much of that was illusion?" he wondered.

With savage jerks Phelps tightened the laces of his artificial foot. "Yes, how much?" The tone of his voice made Towers turn. Phelps pointed down. On the floor, on the dull green metal, there were several distinct marks of a bare left foot.

"What now, Captain?" Phelps asked in that dry bitter voice. He had been seen by everyone in an impossible state of degradation; pain and shame fell from his lips like toads and lizards.

But Towers wasn't going through all that again. He sighed, "Out of here while we've still

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got our skins. If that isn't an illusion too."

Phelps said steadily, "I don't mind keeping on."

"No, Phelps," said Towers gently, "there's nothing more you have to prove." He turned. "Dionisi, are you all right? We're going back."

So soon?

He whirled. "Who said that?"

But the words had been spoken in their minds.

The Cayley and Sylvester? The Cayley and Sylvester? A metallic voice whanged in their heads like an hallucination of anaesthesia. They stood still. "What do you want?" Towers called aloud, ridiculously loud.

This is the Amhibfa of Kwemedn. Will you talk with us? If you will find it more comfortable to use the radio our call signal is . . .

"The way it looks," said Towers, "you may get that foot after all, Joe."

They faced each other across the *go*-board. Although it was 0335 hours by the ship's chronometer, both were too wrought up for sleep. But contact had been made, negotiations arranged, and the overdrive and autopilot were set for Earth.

Phelps shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I mean, not in one way . . . I could have a whole new body every year and I'd still be amputated inside." He added hesitantly, "My family has a long record in the Service. I was expected to go in, and I let them push me without thinking, even though I barely scraped through the Physicals. When I finally started having doubts, I thought, well I'll go out once more and then call it quits for a while." He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke work its way toward the airsuck. "That one more time was when the Qumedni called it quits for me. And I let the guilt nearly kill me for three years after that. I felt my authority was weak, it was my fault the ship blew up, if I'd had a tighter grip—"

"But from what you've told us about it, I'm sure—"

"No, no, I don't believe that now, but I did for three years, and I didn't like it."

"And you won't go back?"

Phelps looked away. "No. You said yourself, I don't have to prove anything more. And I don't want any presents from the Qumedni."

"I'd like to know what the brass back home think we're going to be able to trade for what we want."

"You'll see, handfuls of beads for the friendly tribes." He grunted. "'If you will find it more comfortable to use the radio—'—ruthless pirates, they are calling the tune and they know it! We've surprised them a little, caught at their respect in some way, and they want to know why. We'll have to be careful with them: soon as they find out what makes the wheels go round—" he drew a finger across his throat.

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"Yes," Towers agreed. "I'm tired of being a foreign devil, but I think this is going to be interesting." He pulled out his turnip and found that it was 1:26 a.m. at home. His children, in crib and cot, would be dreaming of star-patrols. His wife, he trusted, would be asleep in th middle of the double bed with her hair in pin-curls and two pillows piled under her head, the way he had found her once on an unexpected return.

Rubbing his leg with one hand, Phelps retracted his previous move with the other. Towers sighed and put away his chronometer. *Oh, you'll be back all right, whatever you say now,* he told Phelps silently, watching the thin nervous hand hovering over the board,—*but not on my ship, by Heaven!*

Beal was strangely glum. He undressed in silence.

"What's the matter, Beal?" Dionisi taunted. "Every other trip when we have come back, you say, 'Now we got them buggers in the palm of our hand.' Why not now?"

"If I had 'em—" Beal clenched a fist till the nails bit. "Jeez, if I had them here!" He flung himself into the top bunk and slept.

Twelvetrees thought of the dance pavilion on the glittering water, and hummed softly.

"I been to the stars
that shine in the skies,
I never seen any
that shine like your eyes,
Oh, dum-diddly dum . . ."

No ripple stirred the calm littoral of his mind, and he fell asleep at peace even with the Qumedni.

Dionisi in the middle bunk lay awake. Thinking of the face of that woman of his dream. He remembered every feature as though she had been real, and he wanted her. Surely, once seen so clearly, she existed somewhere. He had only to use his eyes and he would find her. Somewhere . . . He slid toward sleep.

Suddenly he jerked awake with a force that cracked his head against Beal's bunk, drawing a cry of anguish from himself and a curse from Beal. In his half-sleep he had remembered the face of the tramp he had picked up, and something about that face, some line of it under the thick and tawdry make-up— Suppose her face had been scrubbed clean, perhaps . . . He swore, because now the two faces were inextricably mingled. Damn the Qumedni! They had played with him, given him a vision and taken it away. So, suppose he went back and sought her out? She would be only what she was and take him for a sucker. She was too far gone. It was a long time ago, and for someone else, that she had been the girl on the hill. Yet he wanted something, and he had a sudden feeling for her, for once a painful sense of the derelict flesh he had used and forgotten. He fell into a troubled sleep.

And the *Cayley & Sylvester* spun the first fine warp thread between Earth and Qumedon.

THE END

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GOLDEN THE SHIP WAS— OH! OH! OH!

By CORDWAINER SMITH

A strange tale of a strange war in a strange time, when the Lords of the Instrumentality sent one ship against a world.

AGGRESSION started very far away.

War with Raumsog came about twenty years after the great Cat Scandal which, for a while, threatened to cut the entire planet Earth from the desperately essential santaclara drug. It was a short war and a bitter one.

Corrupt, wise, weary old Earth fought with masked weapons, since only hidden weapons could maintain so ancient a sovereignty —sovereignty which had long since lapsed into a titular paramountcy among the communities of mankind. Earth won and the others lost, because the leaders of Earth never put other considerations ahead of survival. And this time, they thought, they were finally and really threatened.

The Raumsog war was never known to the general public except for the revival of wild old legends about golden ships.

On Earth the Lords of the Instrumentality met. The presiding chairman looked about and said, "Well, gentlemen, all of us have been bribed by Raumsog. We have all been paid off individually. I myself received six ounces of stroon in pure form. Will the rest of you show better bargains?"

Around the room, the councillors anounced the amounts of their bribes.

The chairman turned to the secretary. "Enter the bribes in the record and then mark the record off-the-record."

The others nodded gravely.

"Now we must fight. Bribery is not enough. Raumsog has been threatening to attack Earth. It's been cheap enough to let him

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threaten, but obviously we don't mean to let him do it."

"How are you going to stop him, lord chairman?" growled a gloomy old member, "Get out the golden ships?"

"Exactly that." The chairman looked deadly serious.

There was a murmurous sigh around the room. The golden ships had been used against an inhuman life-form many centuries before. They were hidden somewhere in non-space and only a few officials of Earth knew how much reality there was to them. Even at the level of the Lords of the Instrumentality the council did not know precisely what they were.

"One ship," said the chairman of the Lords of the Instrumentality, "will be enough."

It was.

The dictator Lord Raumsog on his planet knew the difference some weeks later.

"You can't mean that," he said. "You can't mean it. There is no such ship that size. The golden ships are just a story. No one ever saw a picture of one."

"Here is a picture, my lord," said the subordinate.

Raumsog looked at it. "It's a trick. Some piece of trick photography. They distorted the size. The dimensions are wrong. Nobody has a ship that size. You could not build it, or if you did build it, you could not operate it. There just is not any such thing—" He babbled on for a few more sentences before he realized that his men were looking at the picture and not at him.

He calmed down.

The boldest of the officers resumed speaking. "That one ship is ninety million miles long, Your Highness. It shimmers like fire, but moves so fast that we cannot approach it. But it came into the center of our fleet almost touching our ships, stayed there twenty or thirty thousandths of a second. There it was, we thought. We saw the evidence of life on board: light beams waved; they examined us and then, of course, it lapsed back into non-space. Ninety million miles, Your Highness. Old Earth has some stings yet and we do not know what the ship is doing."

The officers stared with anxious confidence at their overlord.

Raumsog sighed. "If we must fight, we'll fight. We can destroy that, too. After all, what is size in the spaces between the stars? What difference does it make whether it is nine miles or nine million or ninety millions?" He sighed again. "Yet I must say ninety million miles is an awful big size for a ship. I don't know what they are going to do with it."

He did not.

It is strange—strange and even fearful—what love of Earth can do to men. Tedesco, for example.

Tedesco's reputation was far-flung. Even among the Scanners, even among the Go-Captains whose thoughts were rarely on

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such matters, Tedesco was known for his raiment, the foppish arrangement of his mantle of office and his bejeweled badges of authority. Tedesco was known too for his languid manner and his luxurious sybaritic living. When the message came it found Tedesco in his usual character.

He was lying on the air draft with his brain pleasure centers plugged in to the triggering current. So deeply lost in pleasure was he that the food, the women, the clothing, the books of his apartments were completely neglected and forgotten. All pleasure save the pleasure of electricity acting on the brain was forgotten.

So great was the pleasure that Tedesco had been plugged into the current for twenty hours without interruption—a manifest disobedience of the rule which set six hours as maximum pleasure.

And yet, when the message came—relayed to Tedesco's brain by the infinitesimal crystal set there for the transmittal of messages so secret that even thought was too vulnerable to interception—when the message came Tedesco struggled through layer after layer of bliss and unconsciousness.

The ships of gold—the golden ships—for Earth is in danger.

Tedesco struggled. *Earth is in danger.* With a sigh of bliss he made the effort to press the button which turned off the current. And with a sigh of cold reality he took a look at the world about him and turned to the job at hand. Quickly he prepared to wait upon the Lords of the Instrumentality.

The chairman of the Lords of the Instrumentality sent out the Lord Admiral Tedesco to command the golden ship. The ship itself, larger than most stars, was an incredible monstrosity. Centuries before it had frightened away non-human aggressors from a forgotten corner of the galaxies.

The Lord Admiral walked back and forth on his bridge. The cabin was small, twenty feet by thirty. The control area, on the ship measured nothing over a hundred feet. All the rest was a golden bubble of the feinting ship, nothing more than thin and incredulity rigid foam with tiny wires cast across it so as to give the illusion of a hard metal and strong defenses.

The ninety million miles of length were right. Nothing else was.

The ship was a gigantic dummy, the largest scarecrow ever conceived by the human mind.

Century after century it had rested in non-space between the stars, waiting for use. Now it proceeded helpless and defenseless against a militant and crazy dictator Raumsog and his horde of hard-fighting and very real ships.

Raumsog had broken the disciplines of space. He had killed the Scanners. He had imprisoned the Go-Captains. He had used

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renegades and apprentices to pillage the immense interstellar ships and had armed the captive vessels to the teeth. In a system which had not known real war, and least of all war against Earth, he had planned well.

He had bribed, he had swindled, he had propagandized. He expected Earth to fall before the threat itself. Then he launched his attack.

With the launching of the attack, Earth itself changed. The corrupt rascals became what they were in title: the leaders and the defenders of mankind.

Tedesco himself had been an elegant fop. War changed him into an aggressive captain, swinging the largest vessel of all time as though it were a tennis bat.

He cut in on the Raumsog fleet hard and fast.

Tedesco shifted his ship right, north, up, over.

He appeared before the enemy and eluded them—down, forward, right, over.

He appeared before the enemy again. One successful shot from them could destroy an illusion on which the safty of mankind itself depended. It was his business not to allow them that shot.

Tedesco was not a fool. He was fighting his own strange kind of war, but he could not help wondering where the real war was occurring.

Prince-Lovaduck had obtained his odd name because he had had a Chinesian ancestor who did love ducks, ducks in their Peking form—succulent duck skins that brought forth to him ancestral dreams of culinary ecstasy.

His ancestress, an English lady, had said "Lord Lovaduck, that fits you!" and the name had been proudly taken as a family name. Lord Lovaduck had a small ship. The ship was tiny and had a very simple and threatening name: *Anybody*.

The ship was not listed in the space register and he himself was not in the Ministry of Space Defense. The craft was attached only to the Office of Statistics and Investigation — under the listing, "vehicle"—for the Earth treasury. He had very elementary defenses. With him on the ship went one psionic girl and one chronopathic idiot essential to his final and vital maneuvers.

With him also went a monitor. The monitor, as always, sat rigid, catatonic, unthinking, unaware—except for the tape recorder of his living mind which unconsciously noted every imminent mechanical movement of the ship and was prepared to destroy Lovaduck, the chronopathic idiot, and the ship itslef should they attempt to escape the authority of Earth or should they turn against Earth. The life of a monitor was a difficult one but was far better than execution for crime, its usual alternative. The monitor made no trouble. Lovaduck also had a very small collection of weapons, weapons selected with exquisite care for the atmosphere, the climate and the

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precise conditions of Raumsog's planet.

He also had a psionic talent, a poor crazy little girl who wept, and whom the Lords of the Instrumentality had cruelly refused to heal, because her talents were better in unshielded form than they would have been had she been brought into the full community of mankind. She was a class-three etiological interference.

Lovaduck brought his tiny ship near the atmosphere of Raumsog's planet. He had paid good money for his captaincy to this ship and he meant to recover it. Recover it, he would, and handsomely, if he succeeded in his adventurous mission.

The Lords of the Instrumentality were the corrupt rulers of a corrupt world, but they learned to make corruption serve their civil and military ends, and they were in no mind to put up with failures. If Lovaduck failed he might as well not come back at all. No bribery could save him from this condition. No monitor could let him escape. If he succeeded, he might be almost as rich as an Old North Australian or a stroon merchant.

Lovaduck materialized his ship just long enough to hit the planet by radio. He walked across the cabin and slapped the girl. The girl became frantically excited. At the height of her excitement he slapped a helmet on her head, plugged in the ship's communication system, and flung her own peculiar emotional psionic radiation over the entire planet.

She was a luck-changer. She succeeded: for a few moments, at every place on that planet, under the water and on it, in the sky and in the air, luck went wrong just a little. Quarrels did occur, accidents did happen, mischances moved just within the limits of sheer probability. They all occurred within the same minute. The uproar was reported just as Lovaduck moved his ship to another position. This was the most critical time of all. He dropped down into the atmosphere. He was immediately detected. Ravening weapons reached for him, weapons sharp enough to scorch the very air and to bring every living being on the planet into a condition of screaming alert.

No weapons possessed by Earth could defend against such an attack.

Lovaduck did not defend. He seized the shoulders of his chronopathic idiot. He pinched the poor defective; the idiot fled, taking the ship with him. The ship moved back three, four seconds in time to a period slightly earlier than the first detection. All the instruments on Raumsog's planet went off. There was nothing on which they could act.

Lovaduck was ready. He discharged the weapons. The weapons were not noble.

The Lords of the Instrumentality played at being chivalrous and did love money, but when life and death were at stake, they no longer cared much about

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money, or credit, or even about honor. They fought like the animals of Earth's ancient past—they fought to kill. Lovaduck had discharged a combination of organic and inorganic poisons with a high dispersion rate. Seventeen million people, nine hundred and fifty thousandths of the entire population were to die within that night.

He moved to the other side of the planet, moving backward one last time, dropped a final discharge of virulent carcinogens and snapped his ship to nonspace into the outer reaches of nothing, far beyond Raumsog.

Tedesco's golden ship moved serenely toward the dying planet, Raumsog's fighters closing on it. They fired—it evaded.

The fleet moved, intercommunicated, and began to surrender. The golden ship appeared once more and then it disappeared, apparently forever.

The Lord Tedesco returned to his apartments and to the current for plugging into the centers of pleasure in his brain. But as he arranged himself on the air jet his hand stopped on its mission to press the button which would start the current. He realized suddenly, that he had pleasure. The contemplation of the golden ship and of what he had accomplished—alone, deceptive, without the praise of all the worlds for his solitary daring—gave even greater pleasure than that of the electric current.

On Earth, the Lords of the Instrumentality gracefully acknowledged that the Golden Ship had destroyed all life on Raumsog's planet. Homage was paid to them by the many worlds of mankind. Lovaduck, his idiot, his little girl, and the monitor were taken to hospitals. Their minds were erased of all recollection of their accomplishments.

Lovaduck himself appeared before the Lords of the Instrumentality. He felt that he had served on the Golden Ship but he did not remember what he had done. Tears poured down his face when the Lords of the Instrumentality gave him their highest decorations and paid him much money.

Lovaduck went back to his estates wondering that his service should have been so great. He wondered, too, in the centuries of the rest of his life, how any man—such as himself—could be so tremendous a hero and never quite remember how it was accomplished.

On a very remote planet, the survivors of a Raumsog cruiser were released from internment. By special orders, direct from Earth, their memories had been discoordinated so that they would not reveal the pattern of defeat. An obstinate reporter kept after one spaceman. After many hours of hard drinking the survivor's answer was still the same,

"Golden the ship was—oh! oh! oh! Golden the ship was—oh! oh! oh!"

THE END

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ALTERNATIVES, INC.

By MACK REYNOLDS

ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

Do you feel you'd make a good science-fiction writer? Okay —let's find out. Your hero is a nice, ordinary guy who gets a bill from some joker for services rendered—said services being the disposal of said hero's wife. But our lad is a bachelor! Now—the problem is, where do we go from here? Plot the yarn out to your own finale and then see how Mack Reynolds, one of the best in the business—handled this intriguing premise.

I DON'T know if anybody ever gets to the point where he's so wealthy that when he finds his bank statement off exactly ten thousand dollars it doesn't make any difference. At any rate, I'm not; no kicks coming, I've got more than my share really, but ten thousand is still a lot of money.

Of course, at first I thought I'd made a mistake. I checked back and finally located the ten thousand. There was the check all right. It was signed with the best facsimile of my signature I'd ever seen; properly endorsed on the back by the payee; and had gone through the usual conglomeration of banks and clearing houses before coming back to me.

The check was made out to *Last Alternative, Inc.*

I gaped at that. It was bad enough being the victim of some sort of racket, but that they had the colossal nerve to use a title so ludicrous that you'd think any banker . . .

Boiling inwardly, I phoned my bank so fast the dial seemed a blur under my finger. I had Vice-President Settin on the line in seconds. He started giving me the usual good-morning-Steven-how're-things-going routine, but I cut him off short.

"Listen," I snapped, "haven't you got enough imagination down there to check with me before cashing a ten-thousand-dollar check for an outfit with a name like"—I looked down at the check again—"like *Last Alternative, Inc.?*"

His voice was pained. "Steve, are you joking? I phoned you myself on that, old boy, almost two weeks ago. You said it was

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bona fide and to put it through."

It took me several moments to get the significance of that through my head. I sat staring at the receiver, trying to figure out some way that it'd make sense.

"Steve?" the phone shrilled worriedly.

"Call you back later," I mumbled, and hung up.

Whoever *Last Alternative, Inc.*, was, or were, they were clever and thorough. The only possibility I could see was that they knew when Settin was going to call me, and had some way of intercepting the call and impersonating my voice. I had a feeling that I'd be lucky to see that ten thousand again.

My next step ordinarily would have been to get in touch with my attorney, Gerald Lash, but something made me pick up the phone book and run my fingers down the "L" column. Unbelievably, there was *Last Alternative, Inc.*, listed as bold as brass.

I was out of my chair, had my hat, and was half through the door before the phone book hardly had time to drop the distance from my hand to the desk.

I grabbed a cab and was halfway to their offices before I had time to consider whether or not it would be wisest to take the police, or at least my lawyer, along with me; but I was in too much of a hurry, and too boiling mad to begrudge the few minutes it would have taken to pick up either. Actually, I didn't expect the crooks to be there, they'd have flown the coop by now.

They were there all right.

The offices of *Last Alternative, Inc.*, were in a second-rate building in the downtown area. Their rooms were attractive and businesslike, but not ostentatious.

The blonde—but not *too* blonde—reception clerk smiled at me and said, "Good morning, Mr. Stevens."

I glowered at her. Her expression, her smile, her ready greeting, gave every indication that she was thoroughly familiar with me. What an actress! I'd never seen her before in my life.

I restrained myself and barked, "Where's the boss?"

She flicked switches, pushed a button. "Mr. Emery has been handling your account, I believe. I'll see if he's in." She added chidingly, "You really should arrange beforehand for an appointment, you know."

I could feel the red creeping up from beneath my collar. It wasn't enough to be taken for ten thousand, I had to have a lecture from an office girl.

The inter-office communicator mumbled and she turned her smile back to me. "You may go in, Mr. Stevens."

I snorted and brushed by her desk. One of the doors beyond was lettered, Frederick Emery; I slammed through it, rammed halfway into the room and came to a belligerent halt before the ebony black desk that composed most of the furniture in the tiny office.

I opened my mouth to blast,

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Suddenly his world was crowded with ghosts.

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but the dapper young man I confronted spoke first. "Just a moment, Mr. Stevens." He grinned and waggled a finger at me. "I assure you, I go through this scene with every client we have. Let me say a word first. We are not charlatans; in fact, if you wish, your money will be refunded. However, *Last Alternative, Inc.*, has never been forced to make a refund thus far. I doubt if we will have to on this occasion."

I stared at him, shook my head and took a deep breath. "Somebody here is crazy; but whether it's you or me, the fact isn't going to cost me ten thousand bucks."

He still smiled but there was an air of do - I - have - to - go - through - this - still - again about him. "Sit down, Mr. Stevens," he said. "Am I to assume that you are not satisfied with our services?"

"Listen," I growled, "first off, you can drop that Mr. Stevens stuff, that air of being familiar with me. We've never met before, and you know darn well we haven't."

He started to say something, but I cut in with, "Now let's get to the explanations and hear what you have to say before I call in the police and my attorneys." I sat myself down in the chair he'd motioned to, and crossed my arms with elaborate patience.

He took a folder from his desk and let his eyes run over it quickly. "Let's see," he murmured. "The agreement was that for ten thousand dollars we dispose of your wife in such manner that legal action could never be taken against you. Hmmm. You assigned us the case approximately a month ago. Your check was cleared last week. Uh huh. It's all quite in order." He looked up at me again. "From your attitude I see that the commission was successful."

The only reason he'd been able to get that much out before I interrupted him was that I was speechless. In a morning that had held a good many surprises for me, this one took the cake.

I finally sputtered, "You mean to sit there and state that I hired you to dispose of . . . *murder* I suppose you mean . . . my wife for ten thousand dollars?" I could hardly believe my ears.

He nodded.

I started to laugh. I roared. I doubled up with the ecstasy of the situation. After a while he gave a few agreeable chuckles in accompaniment.

Finally, I stopped, wiped my eyes, and tried to get my breath. "Oh, brother," I told him, "this time you've stuck your foot in it. I don't know what kind of a racket you've got established here, but brother, this is the end of it."

He chuckled again, in a friendly tone of voice.

I tucked my handkerchief back into my breast pocket and tightened my jaw. I jabbed a finger over the desk at him. "You've

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stuck your neck out this time. You see, *I don't have a wife!*"

He nodded agreeably. "Of course not. We disposed of her for you."

I roared, "That's where you're wrong; that's what's going to break up this *Last Alternative, Inc.*, outfit. I don't know how you've been working it, what kind of filthy blackmail scheme you've been playing, but this time you've slipped. I'VE BEEN A BACHELOR ALL MY LIFE!"

The patient smile still hadn't left his friendly face. "Mr. Stevens," he said easily, "we almost invariably have difficulties convincing our clients of the service we've performed for them. That's just one of the reasons we always ask payment in advance. However, we take further measures. For instance . . ."

He handed me the paper he'd been perusing.

I shot a contemptuous stare at him, then read it rapidly. Supposedly it was a contract between myself and *Last Alternative, Inc.*, in which I agreed to pay ten thousand dollars in return for their disposing of my wife, Bertha Stevens, in such a manner that no legal action against me could result. It was signed by myself, by Frederick Emery and by two witnesses.

I snorted, "A palpable forgery!"

"Look at the bottom of the page," he said. "You'll note a fingerprint there in ink. It's your own, Mr. Stevens."

I looked down in disbelief, but there it was. An uncomfortable inner feeling told me that if I had it checked it would turn out to be mine.

"A detailed piece of work; I congratulate you," I told him coldly, "but you don't think for a minute this is going to convince anyone that I paid you ten thousand dollars to murder a wife I never had."

He waggled his finger at me again. "I wish you wouldn't keep using that term," he said in irritation. "The contract reads, *dispose* of your wife, not murder her."

I just growled at him, and arose from my chair. The farce had gone far enough; it was time for the police now. If anything, that contract would be additional evidence against this fantastic gang. I turned to leave.

"Just one more thing," he sighed. "We often have considerable difficulty, as I said before, in convincing our clients; consequently, we take the further step of making a short talking motion picture of the contract agreement." He motioned to the chair I'd just vacated. "If you please."

He got up from the desk and went to the nearest wall, pushed back a small sliding door and revealed a motion picture projector. He crossed to a file, brought out a tin of film and quickly placed the reel on the machine. He grinned at me, touched a button on the machine and another on the wall. The lights went low and on the oppo-

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site wall began to flash a picture of the interior of the office in which we were seated.

I stumbled back into the chair in amazement and stared.

The scene wasn't very long. In it Frederick Emery read the contract and asked me to repeat it after him. I did. He called the office girl and a third person into the room and had them witness it; then I sat down at the desk and wrote out a check. At that point the camera faded in for a close-up and I saw myself signing the check and the contract. Afterward, I put my thumb print at the bottom, turned directly facing the camera, deliberately winked, and said, "This is the real McCoy, Steve, old man, and the end of Bertha, which is more of a relief than you'll ever know."

The lights in the room went up and Emery slid back the wall shutter and returned to his desk. I sat in my chair, unbelievingly. I might have thought the whole thing staged, if it hadn't been for that last close-up of my face.

Frederick Emery sat down in his swivel chair again and waited for me to speak.

Finally, I got up and went to his phone. I dialed Gerald Lash, and when the lawyer was finally on the wire, asked him, shakily, "Lash, you've been my attorney for more than ten years. Now, don't think I'm crazy, just answer this: Am I, or have I ever been, married?"

The voice said plaintively, "Are you drunk, Steve? You know damn well you've been a woman hater all your life. You never even date a woman, let alone marry one. Why . . ."

I put the phone back on the hook and let out a sigh of relief, then turned curtly to Emery. "All right, brother," I told him, "I'm ready to listen now; talk! It better be good; I imagine it will be if you've got this much of a set-up."

He leaned back in his chair and cracked his easy smile again. "Have you ever considered, Mr. Stevens, just how many of us have wives, husbands, business competitors, wealthy old uncles, rivals in love, or saxophone-playing neighbors, who we would gladly, er . . . *dispose* of were it not illegal?"

I growled, "You mean *murder;* but there're laws against it."

He waggled his finger. "No, I don't mean murder; I mean an alternative to murder. When your relationship to a person becomes unbearably obnoxious, our company, *Last Alternative, Inc.*, becomes your recourse."

I folded my arms again and closed my eyes. "Go on," I told him.

"Have you ever heard of the theory of alternative universes?" he asked.

I opened my eyes and scowled at him. "Have you been reading Science-fiction nonsense?"

He flicked a hand negatively. "The idea had been used a score of times in science fiction, which is beside the point. The fact that an idea is used in fantasy doesn't

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mean that it is either right or wrong. The theory of alternative universes was considered long before the advent of science fiction."

"Go on," I said.

"Roughly, the theory is that there are alternative universes to the one we occupy."

"I know that much," I said gruffly. "Get to the point."

He ignored my impatience and went on easily. "One school of thought has it that there are an infinite number of alternative universes." He noticed my scowl and elaborated. "This school contends that everything happens, every possible thing, and even those things that we might deem impossible, somewhere, in one of these endless number of universes."

I shook my head. "You mean that somewhere, in some other universe, Hitler won the war?"

He nodded. "That's right. And in some universe Napoleon won at Waterloo; and in still another, Napoleon was never born; in others Napoleon was born but turned out to be a carpenter instead of a soldier and spent his life making chairs on Corsica."

"You mean," I asked unbelievingly, "that all possibilities exist, no matter how improbable?"

"Yes. All possible universes exist, no matter how improbable, including the one in which we live—and consider for a moment just how improbable *it* is."

My head was beginning to ache. "All right," I told him, "I understand the theory, I guess. But so what? There are a lot of screwy theories. What has that got to do with my giving you ten thousand dollars to er . . . *dispose* of a wife I never had?"

He sighed. "Don't you see? The existence of alternative universes isn't just a *theory*, it's a scientific law; and in another universe, in another thousand or million alternative universes, you *have* a wife."

I got to my feet, put my hands on his desk and leaned over until my face was only a foot from his. I snarled, "How many times do I have to tell you I've been a bachelor all my life? I don't have a wife. I never had one! *I don't want one!*"

He said patiently. "*Of course*, you don't have a wife. That's what I've been telling you right along. We have disposed of her for you."

I gave up and returned to my chair, recrossed my arms and legs and said, "All right, tell me more. I'll probably have to see a psychiatrist anyway after this mental working over you're giving me, you might as well do it up brown."

"There isn't much more to say," he went on. "You had a wife whom you wished to dispose of, came to us and made the arrangements. The head of *Last Alternative, Inc.*, Professor Bla . . . , er, his name doesn't matter, utilized a discovery he stumbled upon some time ago and removed all traces of your wife, Bertha Stevens, from this

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universe. Of course, she still exists in an infinite number of other ones."

My eyes popped.

"The reason we object to the term *murder*," he continued, "is that you cannot murder a person who has never existed. This universe has been altered infinitesimally. Bertha Stevens was never born; her "family" never heard of her; there is no record anywhere on Earth, except in this office, of her existence."

I slumped back into the chair aghast. For the first time the significance hit me; the possibilities were endless. I sat silently for a long time digesting it. Frederick Emery didn't interrupt me.

"Brother!" I ejaculated finally, "why haven't I heard of this before?"

Frederick Emery consulted his file again. "Er, as a matter of fact," he said, "you're one of our oldest customers, Mr. Stevens. Let's see, the first time you came here it was your business partner . . ."

"Business partner! I never had a business partner!"

"Exactly," Emery said smoothly, "we disposed of him for you." He looked down at the file again. "And then there was a . . ."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "You mean I've been here several times before and each time after you've done an . . . er, job, for me, you've had to go through this whole rigmaroll all over again?"

He nodded in resignation. "And don't think it doesn't get tiring; it's the worst part of this business. When we remove someone from this universe, all signs of him disappear. Obviously, the person who ordered the job done loses all memories of the one removed, even including his trip to this office to assign us the commission. He is invariably indignant to find he has paid for something he never heard about."

I nodded thoughtfully. "Listen," I told him. "I've got a cousin who's in line to inherit his father's estate in a few months after the old codger dies. If this cousin was disposed of, I'd be in line for the inheritance. How about it?"

Mr. Emery was briskly efficient. He got out a new contract form. "Of course, Mr. Stevens. Let's see, we'll have to have the details, his name, address, and so forth." He hesitated. "And we better switch on the movie camera, too; you're a more than usually difficult person to convince, you know."

After the contract was filled in and witnessed by the receptionist and another employee, the camera was brought closer to make a close-up of my signature. I signed the paper, put my thumbprint on it and turned to face the lens.

I winked into it and said, "This is the real McCoy, Steve, old man. Things are going to be much better with Cousin Roy out of the way, much better." I rubbed my hands together happily.

THE END

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They came down from the sky—these strange beings that called themselves Earthlings. They brought us all their superior skills and knowledge and told us we would be the better for learning these things, because they were a superior race. But I knew all of it was leading up to the time when they would—

TEACH ME TO KILL

By ROG PHILIPS

THEY came down from the sky, and it was a very remarkable thing indeed, because their house—they called it a ship—was incredibly heavier than our largest houses and our houses certainly couldn't lift off the ground by themselves. Their huge ship dropped from the clouds like a stone, then fire spilled from it downward like a waterfall, searing the green corn over many acres so that it died, and unbelievably the ship slowed its fall and settled gently to the ground it had just denuded of life.

I was much afraid, but being mayor of our village I didn't want to show my fear, so, alone, I started out toward the strange house from the sky. Behind me I could hear the drums tap out the encouragement of the village council. The long distance drum began its dull booming, informing the surrounding villages of what was happening.

A peculiar thing happened when I was a hundred feet away. The smooth wall of the house—ship, rather—I shall call it a ship—separated in some manner and part of it hinged downward to form an incline. Down this incline marched several humanoid beings dressed in strange costumes that covered all but their faces. They approached me, speaking in a strange tongue.

I stood still, partly through fear, partly because I felt that in this situation movement was dangerous.

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Could a primitive mind cope with modern scientific miracles?

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One of them came up to me, smiling and talking in his strange tongue. His tones were soothing. He slipped a hat of thick texture over my head and, miracle of miracles, I could understand what he was saying. I realized at once what the strange hat did. It amplified his ideative thoughts and implanted them on my mind at the same time the sounds of the strange tongue smote my ears, so that it created the illusion in my mind that it was the words themselves which were suddenly making sense.

He was informing me that they were from a land far beyond the sun, that his government owned this planet and had sold it to him and his companions, and that they were taking possession of it. He told me they meant us no harm, that on the contrary they would teach us how to grow better crops and become civilized. He warned me that he and his companions owned our village and all our land, and even us, and if we did not respect their ownership rights and obey their laws, we would be punished. He assured me that our troubles were over, that he and his companions would henceforth take care of us, and all he asked was for us to let them do so.

It was a strange, almost incoherent speech, and many of his thoughts not connected with his audible speech flowed into me, along with many many words he did not utter. In his mind was much more fear than in mine—strange irrational fears. He feared me because I was less than half his size! He feared me because my skin was of a soft purple texture. He feared the sounds of the drums in the distance. It was a dangerous fear, I sensed, because the slightest thing could easily cause him and his companions to explode into destructive action. I analyzed some of the fears. The color of my skin was associated in his mind with a dread disease of his planet called cancer, and though he knew this disease was not communicable, his fear created a repugnance in him at the thought of even being touched by me.

He was obviously irrational in many respects, so I decided to agree with him in everything, at least for the time being. I told him of my position as mayor of the village and he was quite pleased.

When he took the strange hat off my head I could still understand everything he

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said, but I knew that he believed I would have faulty memory, so I pretended not to understand him without the hat on. This pleased him too.

As I walked back to the village I sifted the information I had gleaned and arrived at certain conclusions. These beings from the far planet, Earth, had a very complex picture of us hinging on sharply white and black notions attached to Danger and Safety for them. Without any relation to why we might do something, it would spell danger or lack of danger to them.

One thing was quite clear. They could destroy us utterly. I had no doubts of that. Somehow they had learned how to use natural forces we had never suspected to exist, and they used them indiscriminately for fulfilling their desires whether those desires were for pleasure or for destruction.

The most remarkable thing about them, a thing I would have never been able even to comprehend, let alone see, without having worn that strange hat, was that their minds were broken up into compartments which did not communicate very well with one another. They had elaborate mechanisms for tricking themselves, hiding their own inner thoughts from one another. For example, the one I had been able to examine wanted to destroy me, hoped I would do something that he could tell himself was a proper thing to destroy me for. At the same time a separate part of his mind didn't want to destroy me, wanted most fervently to be my friend, and would be very unhappy if it became necessary to destroy me.

These beings were mentally ill in directions where we didn't even have directions, yet among themselves they had set up certain notions which they called *norms*, and by common agreement believed themselves to be *normal*. Perhaps the basic structure of their brains was different from that of ours, though that didn't seem possible.

Back in the village I quickly acquainted the villagers with all that had happened and we were in common agreement after a few discussions. The newcomers were irrational but somewhat predictable within certain areas of reaction. It was possible that they could be helped to mental stability, but it

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would take much time. Meanwhile we would have to try to conform to the pattern of behavior their irrationalities had predetermined for us.

That meant first of all that the drums would have to be stilled. Our long distance drummers quickly informed the neighboring villages of this fact so they wouldn't be alarmed at the silence, and we sent messengers to the nearest of the villages to acquaint them with every facet of our problem. Then the drums were silenced.

Next, we would be expected to put on an appearance of care-free natives similar to a pattern they had established on their own Earth. En masse we stripped out family flower plots of their blooms and wove garlands of pleasing appearance. Our musicians gathered in the village square, two-thirds of our populace assembled there loaded down with garlands, and the march started out toward the ship, the musicians playing loudly, the populace skipping along in a semblance of a dance.

While they were gone I took the remaining villagers and began teaching them the new language. From the pattern imposed upon us we could never let them know we knew their language, of course, but it would be necessary to thoroughly understand what they said in order to check their reactions to our conduct and behavior. It took most of the day to teach my people the language. During the evening the ones I had taught could themselves teach small groups, so that by morning we would all know the new language as well as the visitors knew it themselves. But we must pretend inability to learn, and develop what the newcomers knew as pidgin English, because part of their feeling of security rested on a belief that they were more intelligent than anyone else.

Our plan was simple enough. The beings were themselves too old for any hope of real correction, so we must engage in a long range campaign of pacification, creating in them a complete confidence in us. They would have children, and we could work on the children to some extent, though not completely overcoming the irrationality implanted in them by their parents. The second generation of children would be more susceptible. By the third generation we could be completely open and teach

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them complete consciousness —unless the circuits of their brains were constructed wrongly for that. By then we would know.

It wasn't something we particularly wanted to do, it was all we could do. We were left a little dizzy by their strange irrational notions. It seems that a hundred years before their landing a ship belonging to their government landed on our planet and planted a flag, then went back to Earth and recorded the fact with the planet governing body, and that henceforth our planet belonged to the country called the United States, and other nations agreed that it did and stayed away from our planet. Then the United States had sold our planet to those who had just come here, so they owned it. It was all very strange, because I inherited my bit of land from my father, and it had been in my family for many centuries and by tradition could not be sold to anyone until I or one of my descendants died childless.

How they could believe that a series of transactions could in themselves establish either moral or legal ownership is incomprehensible, but they firmly believed it to the extent that they would have believed us dishonest if we tried to hold onto what was ours. They would have justified any preventive action on their part.

Within a few days they were pacified enough by our consistent pattern of conduct to be bold enough to explore the village in small groups, and even singly. Each of them individually alternately feared us for our smallness and looked down on us as inferior because of our smallness.

Many of them were completely likable, once we became accustomed to their irrational viewpoints. Others of them, one group of four men in particular, seemed basically unlike the others in a secret way. They seemed contemptuous not only of us, but of their own kind, and especially toward the one who had first talked with me and placed the strange hat on my head.

These four would come to the village together, then often separate and explore in a systematic manner as though for some reason they were looking for something. They took small things, sureptitiously instead of asking for them as the others did. Little things, mostly. An

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ear ornament, a kitchen knife, a piece of cloth.

Why did they do this? That was a question we could not answer. Perhaps they would have felt embarrassed at asking for them, but when we offered them gifts they refused with a sneer, so we could not understand them, except that they seemed always to be carrying around a Secret that lurked in their contemptuous smile, in the depths of their knowing eyes.

Meanwhile there was much activity emanating from the ship. For this work they had no need of us, evidently. Huge vehicles came down the incline day after day and drove in different directions, unloading at selected sites. Strange machines went to work, erecting gigantic houses of unusual design, and as fast as one was built someone moved in.

Their instructors had been busy teaching us the pidgin English, which was a beautiful combination of repetitious sounds and gestures, the repetitious sounds being simple sounds from their normal language, the gestures conveying meaning by pantomime.

We now learned what our major capacity was to be. House servants to them. This fit in with our own long range plans very well, and we quickly adapted to this new mode of living, those of us who were selected for these occupations. We had found that so long as we agreed with them completely on everything and obeyed their slightest command they felt safe, but if for any reason any of us disagreed, they immediately believed it an act of hostility.

Of course it was impossible to steer a perfect path through the jungle of their irrationalities, and several of our numbers had been killed over misunderstandings that developed. We have one insect whose bite is fatal, and three of our number were killed by suddenly pushing the beings out of danger when there was no time to warn them—and being shot for our efforts until they learned the truth, then they apologized for having killed some of us.

It was a very narrow path we had to walk, fitting into the pattern of their symbology, skirting carefully the slightest thing that would trigger their emotions. Our progress was slow, and one major error of judgment by any of us could have brought

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the whole structure of friendly relations tumbling down. But of course no such error was possible after the first few days, because it would have had to stem from lack of knowledge on the part of one of us, and we constantly compared notes, discussed every aspect of the new kind of social intercourse thrust upon us, and we were all in agreement on our course of conduct.

Then, suddenly, the unthinkable happened. The one who had first talked with me, John, they called him, was found dead in his bed by one of us who promptly called John's wife. She called others of her kind.

A small sliver of wood was imbedded in John's neck, and when it was pulled out its tip was sticky with some dark substance that they named, in horrified whispers, *curare*. They talked of blowguns and looked around fearfully. An ear ornament which I recognized as belonging to one of the men of the village was found on the ground just outside the bedroom window. It had been taken secretly by one of the four I have mentioned, and reported to me.

Now happened the thing that is beyond belief. All the servants in John's household were asked to gather in the center of the village. There were fifty of them and they eagerly complied.

The earthlings formed a circle around them, their eyes and expressions grim. I was called and informed of what had happened. I was then informed that because the servants had not kept John from being killed, they must die.

I explained that the weapon of death was unknown to us, that under no circumstances would we—could we—have killed. I pointed out the obvious, that one of their own number must have killed John to take his place of leadership and ownership. They accused me of lying.

Lying is a strange notion, perhaps the strangest of all those possessed by the Earthlings. It consists in being intentionally in error for some purpose, but trying to appear correct for another purpose. While those I loved were being killed for some unknown set of reasons I could not understand, I tried to grasp the complexity of the notion of lying. As with all they touched, these people used the notion in two directions, to protect themselves, and to attack others—some-

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times jointly. Many things that had been obscure began to fall into place. The blowgun fitted into their symbology of a hostile native tribe, the ear ornament outside the window fitted into their notion of evidence, immediately the entire situation was clouded by a superimposed pattern of beliefs. Even the killing of all the servants was a predetermined pattern. It was retaliation coupled with a warning that the servants must protect their masters or die, turning against their own kind if their own kind tried to murder.

This sort of irrationality is utterly complex, outside the realm of valid logic. It had caught us unprepared. While we buried our dead and the servant groups returned to their duties I called a meeting. It was decided that the most learned men of dozens of villages be sent for, and that we study the entire situation together. Their minds, fresh to the problems unfolded, might more swiftly bring order to our understanding.

It was Klogh Blor, may his memory be perpetuated from the lowest vale to the highest peak forever, who reached the root of the problem. He expressed it in these immortal words: "You have assumed that everything that is not logic is illogical. You have assumed that everything that is not rational is irrational. You have forgotten the basic foursquare rule of Creation, that for everything there is an opposite—and for every pair of opposites there is an opposite pair of opposites, making four. The opposite of logic is illogic, the opposite of logic and illogic is supra-logic and supra-illogic. Similarly, the opposite of rationality and irrationality is supra-rationality and irrationality. You have been lumping three distinct things together into a single opposite. These being from Earth are not irrational or illogical completely, but supra-rational and supra-logical as well. It is you who should be the students, not them."

Our greatest minds took his words and studied them. We soon were developing the calculus of illogic, the technique of the separated contradiction. Our whole orientation shifted into the field of thought of the Earthlings. We *explored.*

Meanwhile, under the direction of Klogh Blor, we redesigned our pattern of behavior. Volunteers were called for. Blowguns were

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built, and one night several of the volunteers *attacked* the house of one of the four I have mentioned, and were *discovered* by his servants before they could get in. The Earthlings tracked them in the direction of the mountains, caught up with them, and killed them, according to our plan. In this way we recaptured the confidence of the Earthlings, by convincing them that there were savage hill tribes and those savage hill tribes were the *common* enemy. But now the force of Klogh Blor's supralogic emerged, for the four I have mentioned knew very well there were no hill tribes, that the "native" blowguns were exact copies of the one they had made themselves. They could not, of course, point that out to anyone but themselves. Oh beauty of supralogic!

How simple we had been to believe that simplicity and consistency were the criterions of perfection. We had judged these Earthlings by our own standards, and now we knew that our minds had been to theirs as a line of no dimention except as length is to the infinity of space itself.

Even so, we found that some of their techniques are demonstrably inferior, or seemingly so. We had to explore and gain experience. One of our goals was to attain split consciousness, to limit the conscious mind to a small area of mental activity so that the mind could deceive itself. We found that with certain drugs this could be achieved, and a group was formed in one of the near villages to seriously explore the results. Once the pattern of self deception was established by use of the drug it could be continued without the drug. With several of the experimenters, however, limited consciousness could not be reversed after a time. Very quickly then they began to exhibit all the behavior patterns of the Earthlings, and to reveal clearly to us that limited consciousness is definitely inferior. Only with complete consciousness can the mind properly handle supralogic without becoming its victim.

The experiments, however, enabled us to learn this, and also to gain a closer insight into the workings of the partitioned minds of the Earthlings and the pattern of rationalization that forms the functional basis of that partitioning.

The four I have mentioned

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used the pattern of rationalization to the stretching point when confronted with the "evidence" of savage hill tribe natives with blowguns that were exact duplicates of the one they had made. At first they had seen the truth clearly, but they could not face the logical consequences of that clear insight. It meant we had deliberately played their game, that we were therefore their equals—and they could not face that. It would mean to them that we were their superiors, according to their own standards. That meant that we could beat them. That spelled insecurity.

Deep within their clouded minds they calmly reasoned it all out—then began to build a structure to bury it under and restore their sense of security. To them, on second thought, there had to be savage hill tribes. The corpses of the natives with loincloths and their purple skins painted in bright colored designs proved it to their pattern of rationalization. In the end their feeling of insecurity, pushed out of the area of consciousness, became a compelling urge to grasp at anything which would preserve their conscious convictions, even when they knew consciously that they were lying to themselves.

By now our whole planet was being informed of day by day events, and the new science of the mind was spreading like fire. Savants from afar, steeped in the new knowledge, trekked into our village singly and in small parties to study the strange giant beings from another planet, and to observe the victims of our own experiments in divided consciousness first hand.

But now we began a new project in our studies. We must commit a murder and study the effects. We already knew the technique, the rules. It must fit into a pattern of symbology of some kind, so that the Earthlings could seize upon the symbols for security.

A drug was placed in the evening meal of one of the four I have mentioned, and while he was asleep under its effects his gun was given to me by a servant. I went to the house of one of the others of the four, and shot him with it between the eyes. The servant then took the gun and hurried back with it to his master.

The explosion, of course, awakened the household, and

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the murdered man's wife called others, and soon they were investigating the murder.

Oh, it was exciting to watch, and after they had shot the one they believed to be the murderer I was called to explain my reactions to having killed a man to none other than Klogh Blor himself. My every word was recorded and dispatched to all villages. I was indeed a pioneer. No one on our planet had ever been known to kill anything intentionally. There had never been any purpose in doing so.

My report evoked so much interest that many sages trekked from great distances in the hopes of being permitted to personally experience killing an Earthling. Of course that could not be. We set up a committee to plan, and only permitted a murder when a basis of seeming motivation was planted.

The Earth community as a whole began a mass rationalization. The planet was "getting them." There was a "curse on the colony." They wanted to "get out."

This we did not want. We needed them as an anchor for our studies of supralogic so that it did not lose touch with reality and ascend into fancy. We called a halt to the murders and to all other experiments and projects.

But with the cessation of our enterprises a reaction began to set in within us, a longing to return to the old ways, the peace of our normal way of life. Eventually we decided that we had had enough of the Earthlings.

It was simple enough to be rid of them. Two well calculated murders, and they made up their mind. Those still left, abandoned their permanent houses and boarded the ship. Fire blossomed under it, and it rose slowly, then more swiftly, soon vanishing from view.

After they were gone a new reaction developed—within me, at least. I missed the Earthlings. I missed their bold soarings into supralogic with sure strokes of their mental wings. The efforts of even our most adept were puny beside my memory of the Earthlings.

I began to spend much of my time idly gazing into the sky, hoping to see the ship return. Surely they must miss us and return.

For many years they did not. Then, one day, a dot appeared through the clouds high in the sky. A spot of

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glowing fire appeared under it. Once again a ship dropped like a stone, then slowed, to touch the ground gently.

I rushed out to the field, eager to renew acquaintance with the many friends I had made among the Earthlings. Once again the side of the ship opened and hinged down, forming a ramp down which Earthlings strode. But these were not the ones. These were strangers.

One of them advanced toward me while the others stood watchful, ready to destroy with their guns. The one who approached me took out a folded paper and greeted me with a warm smile as he informed me that he and his party had *bought the planet from the former owners!*

Oh beauty of supralogic! And he and his companions had paid a steep price for it, too!

Once again the houses of the Earthlings became centers of activity. Once again the drums of the village became silent to be replaced by runners who carried the news to neighboring villages, where drummers started it on its way around the planet in all directions, so that all could know.

But now, as the days and months passed, a new development was slowly emerging, the traces of it trickling in from distant villages. There were those of us now who had become curious about how the mysterious forces of nature itself could be used, and had been studying these things.

In this I was not interested, being a mayor and by custom of untold centuries not permitted manual work, but I watched its progress and urged some of my villagers to keep pace with it, which they did.

But, just as the theme of activity of the planet had altered, so had that of the Earthlings. These were less fearful, more secure within themselves, more experienced, we began to surmise, with planetary colonization as we had begun to comprehend the term.

Basically, their symbols were not the same, were closer to reality. After they had been with us for some months we built up a motivation for murder between two of them, and permitted a scholar from half way across our planet to experience the act of killing.

Immediately an unexpected development emerged.

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They had been waiting for just that. They had brought many instruments with which to examine the evidence, and in a few hours were able to prove conclusively that the Earthling had been killed by one of us. They considered this to be proof that all the murders of the previous owners of our planet had been done by us.

It was interesting to watch how quickly their pattern of rationalization took hold, even with their clear knowledge of the situation. They wished some of us for servants, therefore it must be some of us, not all, who were guilty of the murders.

As individuals they diverged in their cumulative reactions, some of them recognizing that the basic threat to them sprung from our race, and not from just a few individuals of our race, and some of them rationalizing this into submergence under the wish pattern of safety in ignorance.

We held a meeting and decided to wipe them out. The scientists that had sprung up in our villages actually decided the issue, being tired of getting information in little trickles and being unable to examine the spaceship itself.

All the Earthlings were murdered at a predetermined time so that they could not prepare defenses. Since it was to be simple slaughter it was done with short blowguns and small splinters impregnated with curare which the first Earthlings had shown us how to prepare while trying to prove to themselves that that first murder on our planet had been done by a native.

Oh beauty of supralogic! How happy I am! But I must explain. With the Earthlings just so many corpses to be cremated, the ship and the houses and all their contents were open to all on the planet. Scholars from the far corners and remote villages came to study and examine, and to return to their homes and begin the new progress. In the mountains were uncovered bodies of ore as the books foretold, and vast industries were built according to the procedures developed in the books.

Our way of life changed. The drums were silenced for good, replaced by electronic beams carrying image and voice around the planet in less than a second. Ships rose from depots and circled to distant points in a matter of hours. Forces of nature we had never suspected were

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tapped and controlled, and developed far beyond what even the books predicted.

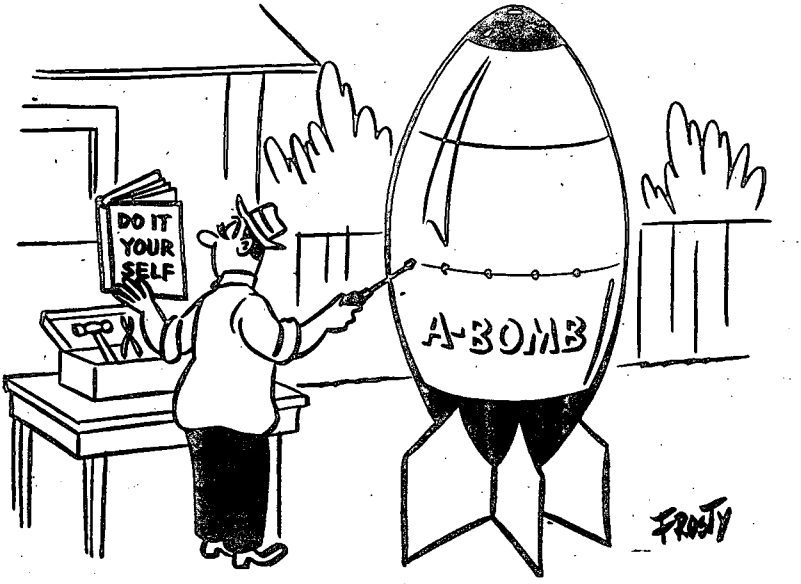
We found many errors in the theories explaining these forces, in the books, but of course we are a long-lived race and can spend centuries mastering a subject, while the Earthlings seem to die just at their peak of usefulness. Myself, for instance, I was less than two centuries of age when the first Earthlings arrived, and now I am at my full prime of seven centuries, and have already done my duty to the race in siring sons and daughters of my wives.

And now, I cannot contain myself any longer. Oh wonderful Klogh Blor, may he be eventually worshipped as the father of the Universe!

I have just bought the Earth. That is what I have been waiting to say. Under the new planetary law I traded my ancestral acres to the government for it and have the deed here beside me, and the ships and my villagers and thousands of friends who have joined their destinies to mine.

And tomorrow we go to take possession of our new home.

THE END



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Illustrated by BERNKLAU

WEAPON

By J. F. BONE

The Dauntless was one of the most powerful ships in the Confederation space navy. Yet, in the showdown with the Eglani, victory was not necessarily to the mighty.

BRIGHT CHATTER flowed around her, filling the clean conditioned air of the room with inconsequential noise that hid the tension in a froth of words. It was what wasn't being said that was important, Ellen Fiske thought as she listened to the high pitched voices. Of course, one never paraded feelings. It was indecent,—something like undressing in public. But this matter of keeping a stiff upper lip could be carried to extremes. You went to these get-togethers, played cards and talked about dresses and children and grocery bills just as though there was no war, as though the Eglani never existed, as though the men in the Navy would come back as regularly and predictably as they did from commercial runs in the old days. But try as you did, you couldn't keep the undercurrents hidden. Fear clung to the sharp shards of sound. There was longing, grief, resignation, and hope, all mixed with a firm unreasoning conviction that if one buried her feelings deep enough everything would solve itself and wind up with a happy ending.

Her hands tightened convulsively and cards squirted from her fingers to the floor as the high-pitched keening shriek of a spaceship's jets came to her ears. The talk stopped suddenly as every woman in the room paused to listen and every eye turned involuntarily toward the ceiling. A big one was coming in. The entire house shivered, quivering in

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resonant sympathy to the throbbing pulse of the spaceship's drives. The sound swelled to a crescendo—to stop abruptly with a sharp finality that left an aching silence in its wake.

"I'm sorry, Anne," Ellen said as she bent to retrieve the cards scattered on the floor. "For a moment I couldn't help thinking that—" she stopped and blushed.

"Don't apologize," Anne Albertsen said. "I know how you feel. Fact is I've felt that way myself—more than once." Her eyes were gray and wise in the frame of her pointed elfin face.

Ellen felt a rush of gratitude. Anne was understanding beyond her years, little Anne with her piercing giggle and gay smile. Anne with a husband already a week overdue. She didn't allow herself the luxury of worry, Ellen thought enviously, but then she had been married nearly four years now. She was a veteran of a thousand nights of waiting, not a bride of four months who had only seen her husband twice since that utterly mad and beautiful honeymoon, that precious two weeks torn from a reluctant Navy.

It wasn't easy to be a Navy wife, to listen to the shriek of jetblasts that lowered ships to earth or sent them h· ·tling outward into the void. It wasn't easy to constantly wonder with each incoming craft *"Is it his ship? Has he come home safely once more?"* Or as the weeks passed to feel the question turn to a prayer *"Please God, make this one his,—make it his!"* This one wasn't Alton's ship. It couldn't be. He wasn't due back from patrol for another week, and until that week had passed she needn't worry. Her reaction was just the involuntary twitch of overwrought nerves.

The talk began again,—the bright chatter that tried so hard to hide the constant unvoiced prayer *"Please,—oh please God —let this war end. Make this senseless killing stop. Turn the Eglani back to where they came from and let us go back to the ways of peace we know and love."* The prayer, Ellen thought bitterly, didn't have a ghost of a chance of being answered. God apparently was on the side of the biggest fleet and the best battle discipline, and neither of these was the property of the Confederation.

For centuries men had travelled the starlanes unopposed. Intelligent races were seldom encountered, and those that were were always on a lower technological level than the outward-sweeping hordes of Earth. They could be safely ignored and their worlds bypassed. There were plenty of others without intelligent life.

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Colonies were planted. Civilizations were built. Wealth was produced, traded, and exploited. And in time a loosely organized Confederation was established,—a glorified Board of Trade that advised rather than governed. And as system after system passed by default into mankind's hands, the idea grew that the galaxy was man's oyster and the Creator had graciously provided him with a knife.

At that, there was some justice in the thought. An expanding civilization meeting no obstacles for centuries is unlikely to believe the minority of Cassandras. So when the expanding front of humanity collided with that of the Eglani, the first reaction was disbelief, the second panic,—and the third grim anger.

But anger was not enough. Mankind was trying desperately, but a thousand years of peaceful expansion were poor experience to pit against an organized race of warlike conquerors.

The war wasn't going too well. Even the communiques had stopped calling the shrinking sphere of human power "strategic withdrawals" and "tactical regroupments." Nowadays they either didn't mention the loss of another world, or published the new frontier line without comment. Long ago the dent in mankind's expanding perimeter had become a bulge, and the bulge a dome that cut inexorably into the worlds of the Confederation. Slowly man's domination of this sector of the galaxy was being blotted out. In slightly more than five years a hundred Confederation worlds had fallen into the hands of the Eglani as the Confederation evacuated and withdrew, bartering precious space and lives for infinitely more precious time to forge the weapons and battle skills to crush the aliens.

Ellen knew all this, but it didn't seem important. What mattered was that her man was out there on the frontier fighting the Eglani. She wanted him home with all the blind possessive selfishness of her sex. She wanted to feel his arms around her and later in the quiet of their home to tell him what he had a right to know. She laid down her cards and ran her hands over her abdomen with a curious half protective half possessive gesture, a wry smile touching her lips. She was doing her part just as Alton was doing his. Life was needed. Life had to be replaced.

Another keening shriek from the sky. Another ship was in.

And Ellen was standing up. Her face was glory.

"It's Alton!" she said with odd softness. "I'd know the sound of those drives anywhere in the galaxy." And then—quietly—she fainted . . .

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Within minutes after landing, interrogation teams from Central Intelligence swarmed over ship and crew like vultures on a dead carcass. For hours the questioning and examination went on and not until the last tape, the last instrument, and the last crewman of the "Dauntless" had been wrung dry of information did the torture stop. Literally nothing was overlooked but the results as usual were negative—three strikes, three kills, two boardings, and nothing to show for them but Eglan corpses. As usual the aliens were thorough. They fought while they could and died when they could fight no more, and headless bodies were no use to Central Research. Reluctantly, Intelligence released the officers and crew.

The Eglan Enigma was no closer to solution than it was five years ago when the aliens had blasted a Confederation exploration ship and had started the war. But Commander Alton Fiske wasn't worried about that. Ellen was out there waiting for him and he'd been delayed too long already

A WEEK is never long at best, —and this had been shorter than most, Fiske decided as he picked up a ground car at fleet headquarters and directed the driver to take him to his quarters. It was a little better than an hour until blastoff, which would give him time enough to pick up his kit and say goodbye, to Ellen for the fourth time. He'd been lucky. The "Dauntless" needed modification and repair and the week planetside was his longest time ashore since his honeymoon. Of course, Ellen wasn't going to like his sudden departure, but she was a Navy wife and she knew what she was getting into before they were married. It was an abiding wonder that she had married him in the face of his Cassandra prophecies of trouble and heartache. But then—Ellen was an unusual woman.

As he left the forbidding grimness of Fleet Headquarters he almost smiled. In a way it was a relief to get away from the long-faced brass whose professionally preoccupied air was merely a camouflage for the worry that ate at the linings of their stomachs. Fiske was glad that he wasn't one of the Ulcer Echelon, that his worries involved relatively simple things such as fighting a ship and getting home alive.

As it was, the pain of leaving again was bad enough, and if it weren't for Ellen's "get togethers" it would be greater. They were the one fault in her otherwise perfect character. How a perfectly sane and sensible woman could endure those gabfests where every blessed female was talking at the same time was

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more than he could understand. But Ellen not only took them in her stride, she took them three or four times a week.

His face clouded as he saw the squadron of ground cars parked before his quarters. Their significance was obvious. Of course, she didn't expect him home this early in the day, and if she'd known of the orders he'd received there probably would have been no one here but her. Still, he'd have to go inside and face that crowd of cats mewling at each other over some conversational bone. He sighed as he stepped out of the car, told the driver to wait, and walked the few steps to his quarters.

Through the clatter of shrill voices the squealing giggle of Anne Albertson cut like a knife, piercing his ears as he stood in the tiny entrance hall, reluctant to enter farther yet unwilling to leave. He winced. Sure, Anne probably had a right to squeal. Her husband had landed his riddled ship yesterday morning and had walked away from the wreckage. Sure—she had a right to squeal, but did she have to do it in his house?

Fixing his expression into a noncommittal mask, he stepped into the living room, and with his appearance the noise stopped. Twelve pair of eyes looked at him and Anne Albertson said into the silence "I think we'd better leave, girls. We're not needed here right now." There was a murmur and a rustle, and miraculously the room was empty, except for Ellen. She stood in front of him, a slim straight girl with a face that was oddly white against the wealth of her blue-black hair. She wasn't pretty, Fiske thought. She was beautiful.

"Are you off again?" Ellen asked.

Fiske nodded. Wives, he suspected, were telepathic.

"Admiral Koenig should go drown himself," she said bitterly. "He has no right to send you off like this. You've been home only six days."

"That's twice as long as last time," Fiske pointed out reasonably. He felt proud of her. She was pure steel all the way through. No tears, no fuss, even a faint smile on her lips. If possible he loved her more than ever. "If you don't like it," he continued with a wry grin, "You might take it up with the Admiral."

"Not me," Ellen said. "The one time I saw him at close range he scared me half to death."

"Oh well, you needn't worry. It's just aother try for prisoners. The Research Institute wants a live Eglan."

"Haven't they got some? Ed Albertson came in with a few last trip."

"Those were civilians. The labs want a military man or two.

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There's a lot of differences between the *Eglan* military and civilians that don't make sense."

"All they'd need to do is look at our fighting men. There's a lot of differences between *them* and civilians that don't make sense."

Fiske grinned. "Anyway, it's a milk run this time," he lied.

"Don't kid the troops on the home front," she said. "It's big, mean, and dirty."

"It's no worse than any other mission. Sure, they're all bad but I'm on detached assignment and there won't be a lot of other ships around cluttering up space and drawing attention."

"I wish they'd leave us alone."

"So do I. But those mule-eared Eglan militarists aren't going to be satisfied until we pin their ears back."

"I suppose so, but I don't like to think of you out there."

"Someone has to go," he said quietly, "and besides I've always managed to come back. I'm getting pretty good at it now." He kissed her lightly on the end of her nose.

"Just keep on being good," she said. "I like having you around." She kissed him then, a fierce hungry kiss that left him breathless. "All right sailor, there's something for you to come home to. Now let's get your gear together."

Ellen followed him to the door. "I'm not going down to the field with you this time," she said. "Last time was enough. I don't think I could stand watching you disappear outside again. But I made something to take with you." She picked up a square flat package from the top of the recorder and thrust it into his hands.

"Another tape like the last one?" he queried.

"Not exactly like the last one," she smiled, "but it's along the same lines. You said you liked the other."

"I did. It was nice to hear your voice. And would you believe I never grew tired of hearing it? It gets lonely out there."

"It gets lonely here too. Now, off with you or I'll be tempted to kidnap you for the duration." She kissed him, a cool wifely kiss that was tender but passionless, pushed him gently away, and stood beside the door until his car disappeared around the corner on its way back to the Base.

She sighed and turned back to the house. That was all it was now—just a house—but for the past week it had been a home. She wondered when, if ever, it would be a home again. It was starting already—the worry, the hidden fear, the agony of suspenseful waiting.

She jumped as the doorbell rang and Anne Albertson's face appeared in the viewplate.

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"I came back," Anne said as she entered the room. "I thought you might need me, and besides —I forgot something." She looked at the recorder with an odd expression on her pointed face. "Well," she said finally, "I didn't think anyone wanted it worse than I did. I thought it might amuse Ed. He's pretty low. He lost a lot of men."

"Wanted what?" Ellen asked curiously.

"That recording I made of the first part of our get together. I left it lying on top of the recorder, but it isn't there now."

Ellen gasped and put the back of her hand to her mouth. "Oh no!" she said in a strangled voice.

Anne looked at her curiously.

"I gave it to Alton," Ellen said. "I thought it was the one I made for him."

"Oh well, he shouldn't mind. Your voice is on it too."

"You don't know Alton," Ellen said miserably. . . .

AS the "Dauntless" bored through Cth space in the middle blue component, Fiske reviewed his last meeting with Admiral Koenig. It hadn't been too satisfactory. Central Research, it seemed, still wanted a live Eglan trooper. It didn't matter that the Navy hadn't captured one in five years of trying. The requirement still stood. It took no great intelligence to understand why Central wanted a prisoner. A great deal about the aliens could be understood if there was live meat available. The only trouble was that there never had been, and probably never would be a live Eglan prisoner of war. Fiske automatically excluded the Eglan civilians. They were essentially no different than a civilized human.

It puzzled Fiske. How a people who were gentle, civilized, and understanding could produce a warrior caste so fiercely dedicated and so utterly different was a mystery he couldn't solve. Sure —some of it probably was connected with the suicide devices surgically implanted in their skulls, but that wasn't all of it. Their fanatic will to fight, their utter disregard of death and their incredible discipline had no reflection in their civilian counterparts. The Eglan soldiery were a living denial of the human axiom that a society left its impression upon all of its components. Certainly there was no reflection of the Eglan civilian in the Eglan soldier,—or vice versa.

Fiske shrugged. After all, it wasn't his problem outside of the fact that he had to fight them. And it had been proven some time ago that ship for ship humanity was fully a match for the aliens. It was only when groups

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were involved that the Eglan superiority was apparent. And then it was overwhelming.

There was some trick of discipline or communication that welded a group of Eglan fighting ships into a single cohesive unit that was thus far unbeatable. Humanity had to learn—or it was lost—and would go the way of the other civilizations that had been in the path of alien conquest.

Fiske shrugged. Given time, men might learn the answer. But time was getting short. Koenig felt that if the answer wasn't found soon, humanity would pass the point of no return. Already the inner worlds were glutted with refugees. Industry was trying vainly to gain upon the tremendous attrition in ships and weapons and still supply the population. Financial structures were tottering on the brink of ruin. Taxation was oppressive, restrictions were galling and unpleasant, and everywhere disaffection with the progress of the war was rampant.

"If the armchair admirals had their way," Koenig had said bitterly "we'd be through now. But we can't hold out much longer. This delaying policy is going to split wide open. We're going to be forced to mount a counter offensive against an enemy we know can outmaneuver and outfight us in large formations,—an enemy who knows a great deal about us, but about whom we know nothing. We simply have to get a line on how they operate."

So here he was again, chasing the will-o-the-wisp of an Eglan prisoner. He sighed, shrugged and turned his attention to the banks of instruments that recorded every vital function of the ship.

This part of the voyage was easy. Not even the inhumanly efficient Eglani could guard all parts of the fluid hemisphere they had pushed into the territory of the Confederation, and ships travelled with relative ease across the ill defined border that separated the two warring races.

But life aboard ship was neither easy nor relaxed. Under Fiske's command, it was a constant striving for perfection. Five years of battle experience had taught him that neither officers nor crew could become too familiar with the offensive and defensive armaments of a ship. Constant practice was the only answer to Eglan coordination and every man aboard knew that the more proficient they became the better were their chances of coming home alive. So all hands spent every spare moment refining skills of war, solving simulated tactical problems, trying to increase reponse speed and improve combat efficiency.

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Fiske checked the control console, his eyes sweeping across the lights and dials that indicated the "Dauntless" was manned and ready and that the crew were at their proper stations. Satisfied that everything was in order, he set up a tactical problem on the board and buzzed for the Executive officer.

"Take over, Oley," he said, as the Exec slid into the chair beside him.

"Hmm, a stinker you leave me," Olaf Pedersen remarked as his eyes scanned the board.

"I'll be in quarters if you need help," Fiske said. He pushed off in a flat dive toward the hatch that led to his quarters as Pedersen took up the proglem and the drill went on. As ship commander he enjoyed the priceless luxury of privacy, and for the little time that remained before breakout, he would luxuriate in solitude and listen to what Ellen taped for him. It was a pleasure he had carefully saved for this moment before they went into action. He hoped that it was something gay and inspiring, perhaps with a little of the affection they had for each other—but whatever it was it would be Ellen's voice and for awhile it would give him the illusion that she was near.

He webbed into his shock-couch, threaded the spool of tape into the playback and flipped the switch. For a few seconds the tape hummed quietly through the guides. Then a blast of noise erupted from the speaker.

Anne Albertson's piercing giggle.

Laughter.

Voices—piercing female voices pitched at their most irritating level—a cacaphonous clatter through which snatches of treble phrases sliced with nerve jangling shrillness!

Fiske's howl could be heard through the entire forward part of the ship!

He reached out angrily to turn off the playback, but even as he did, he hesitated. Ellen must have given him this tape for a reason,—and it was obvious that he was missing it. She wasn't the sort to play practical jokes. Gritting his teeth he forced himself to listen to the gabble that rasped his ears and frayed his temper. It was the quintessence of irritation, a garbled, calm-destroying jangle that had all the comfort of a dental drill grinding out an infected molar.

And then he heard it. The background noise died a little, and across the disconnected chatter came Ellen's voice—clear crisp and light—mouthing the same banalities as the others! It was wrong. Everything about it was wrong. And then he understood.

For behind her voice a pattern

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emerged, a pattern that was neither light, nor gay, nor superficial. It was a desperate clinging to the familiar little things that made up normal life, a deliberate avoidance of the war, the fear and the worry. And Fiske realized with an odd feeling of surprise that here was a counterpart of the wardroom gabfests aboard ship. The attitude was the same. There was no essential difference. He stood it until her voice faded into the background and then he turned off the playback. Ellen should have known that he understood how she felt. There was no need for this. He felt oddly cheated as he put the tape away in his locker and returned to the control room.

The "Dauntless" broke out of hyperspace travelling just under Lume One, well within Eglan territory. Fiske knew from experience that the enemy detectors were efficient and it was always risky to breakout into normal space—but he had to come out to get a fix on potential targets.

"Set!" the gunnery officer said.

Instantly the "Dauntless" slammed back into fourspace. The scan had taken barely ten seconds, and with reasonable luck the dip into normal space would remain unnoticed long enough to give them the advantage of surprise. At best such an advantage would be fleeting. At worst he would breakout in the middle of an Eglan trap. Actuality would probably be somewhere in between. He'd have perhaps twenty minutes—and in that time he'd have to accomplish his mission and get the "Dauntless" back into the relative safety of fourspace.

The world ahead was a small planet about two thirds the size of Earth, and from it came the persistent radiation of nuclear stockpiles and atomic machinery. There was a base here—a big one supported by a massive industrial complex. The Eglani had the habit of concentrating their works, which made for greater efficiency of operation, but also made them far more remunerative targets.

THERE was no waiting. The cruiser flashed into normal spacetime, a bank of red lights blossomed on the control board, and the gunnery officer launched a salvo of torpedoes at the Eglan Base. The torps were new. Each carried a tiny hyperspace converter that pushed them up into the lower orange. They would arrive on target milliseconds after they were launched, breakout into normal space, and detonate. They were tricky things that required nearly ten seconds data to adjust, but when properly set they could materialize within any fixed screen. The inherent qualities of fourspace made them

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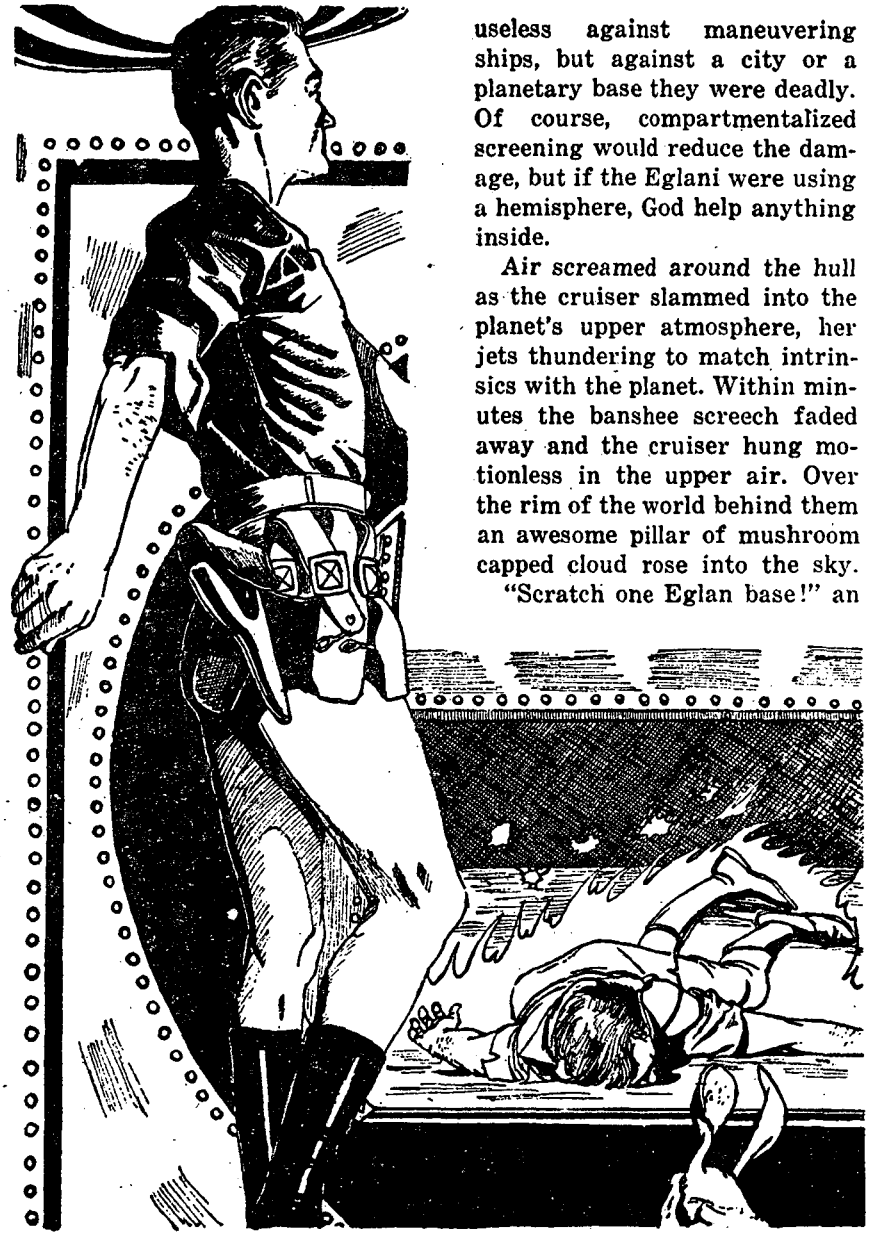

useless against maneuvering ships, but against a city or a planetary base they were deadly. Of course, compartmentalized screening would reduce the damage, but if the Eglani were using a hemisphere, God help anything inside.

Air screamed around the hull as the cruiser slammed into the planet's upper atmosphere, her jets thundering to match intrinsics with the planet. Within minutes the banshee screech faded away and the cruiser hung motionless in the upper air. Over the rim of the world behind them an awesome pillar of mushroom capped cloud rose into the sky.

"Scratch one Eglan base!" an

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anonymous voice in Fire Control yelped joyfully.

"Stow that. Silence down there." Fiske barked.

"Airboat at 0025," a spotter announced, "hedgehopping."

"Forward batteries ready."

"Use a force rod," Fiske ordered. "I want that ship intact."

The pale lance of a paramagnetic beam clawed through the atmosphere and struck the airboat. Driven by the awesome power of the cruiser's generators it struck, clung, and wrenched the airship from its slow path through the sky. Instantly all jamming devices in the cruiser flicked on, ripping the air with a blast of interference that filled all the nearer reaches of space.

"Quarter drive, vertical," Fiske ordered, and the cruiser leaped upward, dragging the airboat behind it into the airless outer regions where the beam could operate more effectively.

"Okay, boys, pull her in," the bored voice of the gunner's mate in the forward blister came over the intercom, and a moment later the fragile shell of the airboat thudded against the armored hull of the cruiser.

"Boarders away!" Fiske ordered.

The boarding party, specifically trained for this operation, opened the airlocks, carved the side off the airboat, and dove into the crowded interior.

The Eglani, caught without spacesuits, smashed to the floor of their craft by uncompensated acceleration, their air lost in a mighty rush, still tried to resist. Space is not immediately lethal, and by holding their breath several managed to fire a few handblasts at the incoming boarders. But it was useless. The beams clawed futilely at the heavy armor and the return fire carved a smoking path through the packed bodies. Then the living died to join the already mutilated dead as tiny explosions limned their heads with momentary brightness.

Fiske sighed at the familiar carnage visible in the viewscreen. Another abortion. But he had expected it. No one yet had caught a living Eglan soldier and he didn't think that he'd be the first to do so.

Young Lieutenant Fitzhugh commanding the party stepped up to the signalman's scanner and reported. "They're all dead, sir. We have no casualties."

"All right, disengage and return." Fiske said as the signalman scanned the piled headless heap of short-legged, long-bodied aliens. One still had a face. The wide mouth, prehensile proboscis and mule ears were still intact, but the back was gone from its head. The face had a masklike quality as it glared up at him with bulging eyes half

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driven from their cavernous sockets.

"Aye, sir." Lieutenant Fitzhugh turned away from the scanner, and one by one the men came back along the boarding line to the cruiser's airlock. The scanner flicked off as the signalman made his way back.

"Enemy on starboard beam," the talker's voice was lost in a clangor of alarms and a thudding concussion as the entire starboard battery erupted one simultaneous blast of destruction at the Eglan cruiser which had suddenly emerged a scant five miles away.

The Eglan was quick, inhumanly quick in his reaction. He had broken out much too close, but even so his primary screens flared an instant before the broadside struck. But no primary screen ever built could stand alone against the megatons of energy that instantaneously erupted against it. Screen and ship disappeared in the hellish blast, reduced instantly to glowing radiactive gas. The enormous fireball licked hungrily toward the "Dauntless" as the automatic controls promptly took her back into hyperspace.

Lieutenant Fitzhugh, still ten feet from the open airlock saw the flare of the explosion and the premonitory shudder of the ship. He knew that he didn't have time enough to make it. With the strength of desperation he threw the object he carried toward the rapidly closing airlock as the ship vanished from sight and the searing fireball enveloped his body. He never had time to decide whether his aim had been true or not . . .

Fiske looked at the Eglan head Lockman Vornov was holding up to his viewplate. The man was talking. "—He was still outside when we hypered, sir, but he threw this in through the airlock. It hit me on the leg, sir."

For the first time Fiske really understood the term "mixed emotion." He was feeling it now. Regret at Fitzhugh's death was exactly balanced by the wild hope that the impossible might have happened—that the head was that of an Eglan soldier rather than a civilian. Certainly Fitzhugh wouldn't have brought it back unless he had good reason to suspect that it might be useful—nor would he have tried so desperately to get it aboard ship.

"Get that thing down to Doc Bonner," he ordered, "and tell him that I'll be along in a minute." . . .

Old Doc Bonner who derived his nickname from combat rather than chronological age looked inquiringly at Fiske. "Should I post it or pickle it?" he asked.

"Post it. It might blow up be-

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fore we reach home. Get to work."

"It's a point," Bonner admitted, "but it might not be too valid with Headquarters. Since it hasn't exploded by now it probably won't."

Fiske shook his head. "There's no sense in taking chances. Besides it might belong to a civilian."

"Not this baby," Bonner said. "It's military." He indicated a white line at the base of the skull. "That's where they blow up" he said. "There's a charge implanted there. And besides, it's as you say, sir, we shouldn't take chances." Bonner laid out a row of shining instruments, turned on the visual recorder over the table and went to work.

"Hmm—must have been quite a bit of dissection here," he commented as he inspected the back of the head. "Poor job of suturing and lots of fibrous connective tissue, but it's healed well enough. He cut in delicately with a scalpel. "Oh-oh! Paydirt! Now wait a minute—let's find out where these leads go—hmm,—that'd be the spinal accessory nerve if this head were human, but with this fellow it might be anything." He swung an autocamera into place and took a series of still pictures, probed the skull for a moment with a pair of long-jawed forceps and lifted out a tiny translucent capsule with a fused dark globule dangling below it. "Ah—here we are." He placed the capsule carefully in a cotton lined pan. "You'd better get that thing down to engineering," he said. "That's not my line. I'll finish this post while you're gone. I might find something of interest to report in the Medical Journal. Incidentally, that capsule was linked to the nerve over a micropore graft. I'm keeping that part for microdissection. It wouldn't do you any good."

Fiske took the pan and left the surgery. Doc was right. This was the part that was his baby, not that ball of meat in there on the tray . . .

CHIEF Engineer Sandoval took the pan gingerly. Setting it on a bench he peered at it thoughtfully. "Hmm, a sealed unit," he said. "We'll X-ray it first and maybe then we can do something about it."

"Better disconnect that detonator, or the damn thing may blow your head off," Fiske advised.

"Don't try to tell me my business, skipper," Sandoval grinned. "I was doing this when you were in knee pants. You go back and run the ship and me and my boys'll find out what makes this tick."

Fiske grinned with mild embarrassment. "Okay, Sandy, I'm off to the ivory tower. Pass the

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word when you find what cooks."

"Sure thing." . . . .

Bonner reported nothing new on the brain. "It'll make a nice paper," he said, "but that's all. In fact I'd surmise that our own are a trifle more complex than theirs if convolutions have anything to do with mental power. The Eglan brain is rather simple in some aspects. But of course it's the relative weights of brain and cord that really count."

"You're way over my head," Fiske said.

"Incidentally, what did engineering find out about that gadget?"

"No report as yet. I'll let you know if anything develops." Fiske cut Doc off the intercom as Chief Sandoval came in.

Fiske looked at his grim face curiously. "What's the trouble?"

"Nothing,—that's the hell of it. I've been kicking myself for not figuring it out before. That gadget's nothing but a fined-up subetheric communicator. We used them before the Lorcom was developed. There's an explosive charge, but the arming mechanism was burned off. And that's it."

"Not quite," Fiske said. "There was a direct neural connection. And that's why they fight as a unit. A ship's commander would have complete charge of his ship like a brain with a hundred bodies—and he's probably hooked up with a squadron C.O. And the squadron C.O.—what a system!" Fiske cut off and twisted the selector.

"Communications!" he said.

"Aye sir."

"Contact Chief Engineer Sandoval, tape his data and send it to Prime."

"Sorry sir—can't be done!"

"What!"

"Yes sir—there's an interference blanket in Cth that you can't drive anything through. I've been trying to raise Base for an hour."

"When did this come on?"—Why wasn't I informed."

"It came on about an hour ago, and you were busy. We've never had anything like this before, sir. I thought I'd try to punch a beam through it before I quit."

"All right—break out the message torps—tape the data and send them off."

"But—

"That's all, Lieutenant—get cracking."

"Aye sir."

"Well—that's a new wrinkle" Fiske observed. "They've figured out our Lorcom—and we're jammed."

Pederson looked up from the control board "Hmm—doesn't smell so good. They wouldn't jam us unless they had something else up their sleeves. They're fig-

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uring on stopping us, no doubt."

Fiske nodded. "I thought of that—but how?"

"Damned if I know—but they've got some idea."

"Well two can play at this jamming game—and we'll deal with the other thing when it comes." Fiske dialed Sandoval "Sandy"—he said as the engineer's face appeared on the screen. "Can your boys build an all wave subetheric broadcaster?"

"Yes and no," Sandoval said. "We can build one—but we're not able to. No components."

"How about modifying the Lorcom?"

"That wouldn't be too tough. But you can't be thinking of—"

"How long would it take?"

"Twenty hours minimum. You realize, of course, that it's going to deprive us of long range communications."

"All right, so we lose them. They're worthless anyway. We're being jammed. Now get going on that conversion, and cut all the time you can."

"Aye sir."

Sandoval's boys must have sweated blood, Fiske thought, for it was barely twenty two hours before the Chief's heavy voice came over the intercom. "It's finished, sir." Sandoval said. "We're ready to roll."

"Good," Fiske replied. "What's the output?"

"A kilowatt across the board."

"Hmm—not so good.—We're not going to blanket much with that."

"You'll get through all right, but you can't expect any more than that. If you want to jam you'd better concentrate on the 1400 band. You can smother anything in that area."

"No. I'd rather have full coverage. I think the noseys are laying for us, and I want something that'll affect every Eglan in range, not just part of them. If we confuse them enough we can crack straight through before they recover."

"What do you intend to use to cause this confusion?" Sandoval asked.

A grin crossed Fiske's face. "We might put a signalman on the mike and give them the latest box scores in the Tri World league mixed with double talk. Or our linguist could issue phoney orders in Eglanese."

Sandoval grinned in answer. "Sneaky, isn't it?—this business of hoisting the engineers on their own petards. Personally, I favor music—some of these squirm combos the boys listen to would drive a saint out of Heaven."

Fiske chuckled. "It's an idea—and not a bad one at that. Angelo Bordoni in the signal section has some progressive squirm recordings that'd make your hair curl. We'll make him a disk

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jockey as soon as we have some Eglani to try it on."

"You won't have to wait long, sir," Pedersen said, as he swivelled his chair to face Fiske. "Detectors report a disturbance in C-green about ten hours ahead. Looks like a couple of class one cruisers. Not ours."

"What's their bearing?"

"They're moving along our line slightly under our component."

Fiske leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face. He looked at Pedersen and nodded.

"Battle Stations, condition two," Pedersen said to the talker. "Well, there's two of them down there to try your gadget on."

"Gives us one break at least," Fiske said "We're not too outnumbered."

Pedersen shrugged off the pun. "In your shoes, sir," he said, "I'd be tempted to run like hell."

"Sure, so am I. But just where could we get a better chance than this? If we're going to fight we might as well get decent odds."

"You call two to one decent?"

"I'll tell you more when their drive patterns are analyzed. If they're cruisers we can outgun and outrun them,—and if they're battlewagons they'll never catch us. Not even—"

"Objects register as enemy heavy cruisers," the talker said "Drive intensity point oh two over ours."

"Well," Pedersen remarked "You're wrong on one point. We're not going to outrun them."

"Seems that way," Fiske agreed. "They must be new models,—probably ones like those that chewed up Ed Albertson's ship. But they can't be any more heavily armed than we are."

"Maybe not, but there's two of them" Pedersen said drily. "I would imagine this changes things."

"Naturally. We'll run for awhile. I'm not risking my ship against those odds if I can help it." Fiske turned on the command circuit. "One eighty gyro turn," he said "Execute!"

The "Dauntless" swapped ends and virtually without delay began backtracking across the warps of Cth space. Since inertia didn't exist in hyperspace the change in direction was made instantaneously. At maximum blast the "Dauntless" began to put space between her and her pursuers, who at once changed course to overtake the fleeing Confederation ship.

HOUR after hour the three ships drove through the harsh blue monochrome of upper Cth, and slowly the distance between pursuers and pursued les-

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sened. Travelling in a great curve that would ultimately take them into Confederation territory Fiske and Pedersen watched the telltale dots in the spotting tank come closer.

"We're not going to make it," Fiske said finally. "They'll catch or pass us before we hit the frontier."

"Nice," Pedersen replied. "With one ahead matching our component and sowing mines, and the other behind and above us just in case we try to drop out. We've got about the same chance as a snowball in hell."

"It's not quite that bad. We have weapons and we've got the broadcaster. They won't be expecting it, and if we drop into normal space looking like we want to fight, I'll bet they'll follow us."

"Sure they will."

"They'll get a surprise then. How'd you like to be wearing one of those cute little communicators and get a blast of Bordoni's progressive squirm the minute you made breakout?"

"I wouldn't."

"I'm betting that they won't either." Fiske turned to the talker—"all hands—Battle Stations! Full armor. Condition one. Bordoni—stand by with your recordings—report when ready." A cold ball bounced in Fiske's stomach as the reports snapped in. Up until now the Confederation ships had been individually superior to the aliens, an advantage that barely counterbalanced the Eglani's coordination, but these ships were superior to his own in speed at least, and what they might lack in firepower they made up in numbers.

No skipper in his right mind would tackle two to one odds in favor of the aliens. But it was unavoidable now. Fiske shrugged. If he was right about the effect of his broadcaster, he had a chance—but the chance was a slim one anyway you looked at it. Sure—he knew the secret of Eglan coordination, but could he disrupt that coordination? It was a distinct possibility that his attempt at jamming would only be a minor annoyance, and if it was, the secret of the Eglani would die with him.

Of course, there was a possibility that one of the message torpedoes would get through—but torpedoes travelling on a fixed course were usually intercepted and destroyed. At best they were a forlorn hope—sent Earthward more as a gesture than with any expectation of arrival.

And with the Lorcom converted to a subetheric broadcaster he had no exterior communications. The "Dauntless" was on her own—cut off from help—wholly dependent upon the skill of her crew for survival.

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"Stand by for breakout," Fiske ordered.—"Execute."

Smoothly the ship swapped ends, halted instantly, and dropped like a stone through the Cth components as Sandoval cut the converters. With scarcely a shudder the "Dauntless" slipped into normal space.

"Full ahead" Fiske ordered and familiar acceleration clutched at the bodies of the crew. With every electronic and visual sense extended, screens glowing on standby, drives flaring a fierce blue against the dark of space the "Dauntless" swept forward toward the frontier far ahead. Her speed was less than a snail's crawl compared to the inconceivable velocities she had been travelling in Cth but in normal spacetime weapons functioned and subetheric communicators worked. Here, fighting was an art—refined by years of drill and practice.

"Bearing zero two four—enemy cruiser. Range two thousand-closing" the talker said. Bearing one nine zero—negacruiser. Range fifteen hundred—extending."

"Not too smart," Fiske observed. "That rear ship'll have to hyper to get ahead of us, and by that time we should get a crack at our long eared friends up ahead."

"Bearing zero one eight—range one thousand—closing. Bearing one nine zero—negative." the talker interrupted.

"Our little follower's gone back into Cth" Pedersen said.

"Gives us three minutes at least, before he can adjust on us."

Bearing zero one six—range five hundred—closing." the talker said.

"Stand by all stations," Fiske said calmly—"Bearing zero one six steady—range four hundred, —three hundred,—two five zero, —two two zero—two hundred,—one eight zero" the talker's metallic voice was flat in the tense silence of the ship.

"At my command," Fiske said as he poised his finger over a large red button on the control console.

Over the complex network of spotting, ranging, and computing devices electronic orders flowed into the gun, and torpedo stations. Servos hummed as the weapons aligned on their target and gun crews alertly followed the movements of the automatics ready for emergencies or malfunctions.

"Bearing zero one three, range fifty-closing," the talker's unemotional voice continued. Fiske's hand stabbed the button and an instant later the "Dauntless' yawed violently to the blast of fire that erupted from every

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weapon capable of bearing on the Eglan.

"Enemy has fired" the talker said. The "Dauntless" slewed violently as the pilot took evasive action.

For a long second the Eglan hung in space her screens blazing. Then she began to turn,—but it was too late. The concentrated fury of the "Dauntless" broadside erupted against her screens in blazing pyrotechnics. The Eglan staggered and spun off at a tangent. A second later the "Dauntless" bucked and jumped as the Eglan's fire crashed home. The secondary screens flared and vanished. The primaries crackled into the violet under the enormous load of dissipating the megatons of energy that flared against them.

"Holy George!—what sort of stuff are those fellows carrying?" Pedersen breathed, "They outgun us too!" A trickle of blood ran from his nose.

"No—we're about even there" Fiske said as another broadside erupted from the "Dauntless" and another load of destruction hurtled towards the Eglan.

"Enemy has fired" the talker said, and the "Dauntless" again turned off to one side. This time the salvo missed by a comfortable margin.

"What's wrong with them?" Pedersen asked as he stared into the tank. "They're not evading."

"Maybe they can't. We hit him near the drives."

"There they go—too slow, way too slow!"

The "Dauntless" salvo struck and for a moment an intolerable flame lighted space, and when it died the Eglan cruiser had vanished.

"Bearing zero four five enemy cruiser—range one hundred—closing," the talker's voice interjected. "Enemy has fired."

The "Dauntless" yawed violently as Fiske stabbed at the Cth switch. The familiar quivering shook them as the ship clawed at the edge of hyperspace—and simultaneously a pile-driver blow struck them astern tearing crewmen from their safety webs and slamming them with bonecrushing force against unyielding plates and bulkheads. The "Dauntless" rang like a giant gong—the sound disappearing slowly with shimmering reverberations that assumed tangible shapes as the harsh red of lower Cth closed around them.

"Skipper!" the ship intercom rattled. "We can't hold her here! Number three converter's dismounted and there's a hole in the engine room big enough to drive a truck through!"

"Enemy cruiser Cth yellow dead ahead—dropping to our component," the talker said.

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"Well—we got one of them," Pedersen said. "Might as well take our medicine like good boys. He'll be sowing mines in a minute."

"That Eglan was cold meat," Fiske said. "The broadcast worked!"

"That second ship wasn't. They came in on us like a hawk at a chicken." Pedersen answered.

"They didn't have time to get the full benefit of it."

"You going to give them another chance?"

"We'll have to. We can't stay here. We can't run, and up here the broadcaster doesn't work. So we go down again. With that noise of Bordoni's we should be able to jar their back teeth loose. Which reminds me—I'd better see how he's doing. That broadcaster is pretty near the engine room." He punched the intercom selector. "How's it going, Bordoni?" he asked.

An anguished wail came out of the speaker. I was just changing a platter when we got struck. I sat on them! Even on my Stan Kenton album, and that's a classic!! They're busted to hell! All of 'em!"

"Bordoni!" Fiske snapped.

"Sir?"

"Valve it off son. It can't be helped.—Have you any more?"

"No, sir."

"Can you sing or make noise or something?" Fiske asked hopefully.

"Negative sir. I've got mike fright—always did have."

Fiske sighed—"Very well—you're relieved. Report to your station."

"Now what?" Pedersen asked.

"We get something else."

"What?—Bordoni had the only squirm aboard. I know. I shook the ship down—there isn't a thing one tenth as—"

"Enemy has matched components" the talker said.

"Down two shades" Fiske ordered. "We can dodge for awhile" he said absently as the ship dropped into a deeper red monochrome "but he'll get us eventually."

"Sir, the engine room broke in. The converters aren't going to take much more of this—we're on twenty percent overload right now!"

"They'll have to take it" Fiske snapped "If we want to stay alive!"

"I'll try to keep 'em going, boss" Sandoval's voice broke in.

"Thanks Sandy." Fiske cut off. "Now about the noise business—"

"Well" Pederson said—"You might try doing it yourself. Seems that I remember you howling like a wounded wolf a few days ago, just before we clobbered that Eglan base. If it's noise you want, why don't you

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give out with a few warwhoops. You damn near lifted the lid off this can."

Fiske's eyes widened. "You have something there," he admitted. He flipped the selecter to communications "George," he said, "can you rig a continuous tape playback into that broadcaster? Bordoni's aborted,—smashed his records."

"Sure. Give me ten minutes."

"Make it five and send one of your boys up here. I have a package for him." Fiske switched off and turned to Pedersen. "Have someone go to my quarters and get that roll of sound tape out of my locker. It's in the upper left compartment. Give it to George's man when he shows up." He looked at Pedersen's puzzled expression and grinned. "We're not licked yet, Oley."

"Enemy has matched component" the talker said.

"Down two shades—and keep changing our course. Don't follow one line for more than ten seconds. Fiske ordered.

"That gives us about four more drops before we breakout," the pilot's voice said over the speaker. "And we can't dodge too long. He can outmaneuver us, and ride us right out of Cth."

"How long?"

"Maybe five minutes—maybe less."

"Well—get on with it—we can't stay here"—Fiske looked glumly at the control board. There was nothing he could do at the moment.

"Aye sir." The red monochrome deepened a trifle as the "Dauntless" dropped closer to breakout.

"Damn—they're quick!" Fiske muttered.

"We're not going to be here long at this rate" Pedersen observed.

"We do what we can. Unless we get that broadcast rigged we've got no chance at all." Fiske lapsed into silence.

A minute passed as the "Dauntless" dodged frantically and the Eglan maneuvered for position.

"Enemy has matched component" the talker said. Instantly the "Dauntless" was surrounded by a reddish-black gloom.

"Infra band coming" Pedersen remarked. "Our spotting isn't too good there. He can be on top of us before we know it."

"Let's hope theirs isn't either" Fiske answered absently.

"Enemy has matched component," the talker said.

"Well—that's that," Fiske said with grudging admiration as the ship went dark, and began to buck and shudder in the stress area at the border of Cth and normal space. "He's just about

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kicked us out of commission."

A violent shock lifted the cruiser and shook her. Metal screamed and ripped as the ship, struck by a mine at the very edge of Cth, was driven downward through the border into breakout. Flashes and pinwheels of light flamed across Fiske's eyes as the ship spun madly into normal space.

The talker wakened him "Enemy cruiser, range three fifty-steady."

Fiske cursed weakly at the unemotional robot voice. Somewhere amidships a dull explosion shook the ship, and then the whole mass of the cruiser moved sideways as a broadside let loose.

Fiske came to awareness with a jerk. Beside him was Pedersen, his face a bloody mask, calmly operating the control board. A piece of scalp had been stripped neatly from his head and hung down the back of his neck together with the smashed wreckage of his helmet.

"Break off, Pete—I'm back. Get a patch on that scalp and a new helmet. You'll look silly breathing space if they hull us up here."

"I thought you had it, skipper," Pedersen grinned through the blood. "That last jump was pretty rough."

"What's up?"

"I don't know. Our Eglan friend is shooting at us from long range. He doesn't seem very eager to close. Came in to three fifty and has been matching us ever since. Looks like he's waiting for help."

"We can't let this go on.—What's our situation?"

"Damage control reports we're about eighty percent effective. They're working on the number three converter but it'll be at least an hour before she's ready. We've lost two secondary batteries, but the mains are all right and our screens are keeping out the stuff our playmate's sending over."

"Our drives?"

"Okay—except for the converters like I said."

Fiske looked into the plotting tank. "Full right turn", he ordered. "If he won't close—we will."

"Skipper!" the intercom chattered "We've got that tape in. We're ready to roll down here."

"Well—get going" Fiske snarled. "Do I have to tell you everything?"

"No sir—but we thought—"

"Stop thinking and turn that broadcast on!"

"Yes sir!"

"Eighty five degrees right turn—down five" Fiske said. "Full drive—execute!" He bent over the tank and watched the Eglan. The enemy response was slow. "It's working" Fiske murmured happily.

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The blindest observer could see that something was wrong with the alien. His maneuvering was sloppy, his fire confused, sporadic, and inaccurate,—and as the "Dauntless" shells crashed into his secondary screens there were no evasive maneuvers or blazing pyrotechnics of point reinforcement. Fiske grinned ferociously. A few more salvos and that would be the end of him.

A violent blow wrenched the "Dauntless" sideways, and another hurled her forward with a tremendous burst of acceleration. And the drives stopped dead. Under momentum alone the cruiser shot onward.

"We've had it, boss." Sandoval's voice came in like a knell of doom. "Torpedo caught us right on the drive lattice. The drives are shot."

"Enemy cruiser coming up dead astern," the talker said. "Range eighty—closing slowly."

The "Dauntless" lay dead—coasting through space. The faint hiss of escaping air and the clatter of booted feet were the only sounds in the hull. The lights still burned on emergency power—but the drive and the powerplant were gone, and with them the "Dauntless" capability to fight.

Fiske wondered dully what was keeping the ship intact. Somehow the riddled hulk had failed to explode in the sunburst that usually marked the finish of a fighting ship. The guns were silenced. The last mine and torpedo had been fired. The intercom was a shambles of shorted circuits and dead lines. A hole fully a foot across had been ripped through the right side of the control room giving a free opening onto the blackness of space. One more shell, Fiske thought—and that would be the end of it.

But it never came.

The Eglan ship matched velocity less than a hundred yards away—and a dazed communications officer reported—"Sir—they've opened a channel—they want to surrender!"

Fiske looked at Pedersen.

Pedersen looked at Fiske.

The blank incomprehension on the face of one was precisely matched in the face of the other. This was incredible! The Eglan was still in fighting trim. The "Dauntless" was a wreck. Yet the aliens were offering to surrender—and they never surrendered!

"A trap?" Pedersen asked.

"Why? They've got us. We're helpless and they know it." Fiske turned to the intercom. "Tell them we accept. Tell them to lower their screens and prepare to receive boarders." He turned to Pedersen. "Wonder

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how we're fixed for a boarding party? You have any idea?"

Pedersen shook his head.

"I'm going to have a look." Fiske removed his safety harness and rose stiffly from his chair, moving painfully toward the manway that led aft to the main gun batteries and the drives.

He passed shambles. Bodies were everywhere. The sick bay had been destroyed by a direct hit. Guns and torpedo mounts were twisted wreckage garnished with dead. The communications center was miraculously untouched, still operating on emergency power, still broadcasting over the all wave transmitter as the endless tape ran and reran through its guides. A hulking figure was bent over the transmitter, working with torch and welding rod resetting tiedowns broken by concussion. With dull surprise, Fiske recognized Sandoval.

The big man saw him and grinned feebly. It was a miracle that he hadn't been opened up, but his battered armor was intact except for several minor rips covered with patches and sealant. His helmet was dented and the short range communicator at its back was shot away. Fiske shook his head as he approached and laid his helmet against the engineer's.

Sandoval's voice came through "I've got what's left of my boys working on the drive. Give us an hour and we'll be moving again."

"Call them off, Sandy. There's no need. The Eglan has surrendered."

"They've what?"

"Surrendered. Quit. Given up. We've won!"

"You sure you're not in shock, skipper?"

"Just get your men together. We've got to make up a boarding party out of this mess somehow. We've got to collect the wounded and get them out of this wreck. Since the Eglan's still intact we'll take over his ship."

"But skipper, everybody knows that the Eglani don't—"

"Break it off Sandy, and do as you're told. That's an order."

Shaking his head the [illegible] man floated off as Fiske shrugged and turned upward toward the gundecks, picking his way through torn and splintered metal, collecting survivors and issuing orders similar to those he had given Sandoval. In the next twenty minutes Fiske destroyed forever his carefully built reputation for compassion and humanity. . . .

THEY assembled on the main deck—what was left of them. The whole and the wounded, barely thirty men of a crew that had numbered over a hundred. They gathered in a tight

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knot staring into the vision screen that gave a clear view of the alien drawn up alongside. The Eglan ship hung black and massive in space, her seamless sides blank save only for the circle of yellow light that marked an open airlock. No glitter of screens reflected the icy glint of the stars. There was a stillness about the ship that was almost frightening as she edged slowly closer to the battered sides of the "Dauntless."

"Boarders away!" Fiske ordered and the motley group of survivors towing the wounded who still lived, opened the airlock and pushed off across the intervening space that separated the two ships. Fiske waited until the last man disappeared into the circle of light in the Eglan's side before pushing off. He blinked once or twice to clear the traces of moisture from his eyes as he looked around the empty stillness that had been his ship. It wouldn't do at all for his men to suspect that besides being a softy, he was a cry baby to boot. . .

The Eglan had a double airlock, and as he emerged through the second airtight valve, he was met by Olaf Pedersen. Pedersen's helmet was off and there was a peculiar expression on his face.

"Well? What did you find?" Fiske asked, anxiety in his voice.

"She's all ours. There's no fight left in them." Pedersen said. His voice was oddly strained. "We just moved in and took over. The men are collecting the prisoners now—what's left of them." He pointed down the low wide manway that led into the interior of the ship. "Control room's down there," he said.

"I know." Fiske looked around curiously. The ship was like the other captured jobs he'd seen. Even the two decapitated Eglani on the deck were familiar—and the other enemy dead he passed on the way to the control room were not abnormal. One expected to see them in a captured Eglan ship. It was the living who were strange, tight faced, thick bodied, stiffly erect aliens and their human guards who stood in the cross passageways watching him as he passed. Fiske shivered. He had never in his life seen eyes so hell-haunted as those the Eglani turned on him. The aliens looked like they would shatter at a touch, brittle shells held intact by a force greater than their wills.

"Gives you the creeps, doesn't it?" Pedersen asked in a low voice.

"It's worse than anything I've ever seen," Fiske replied. "These people are on the edge of collapse. This is chaos!"

The feeling of brittle tension

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increased as they entered the control room in the center of the ship. A short wide Eglan stood beside the master console. He raised his arm in what was obviously a salute, which Fiske punctiliously returned. A muscle in the Eglan's cheek twitched spasmodically. His fingers were clenched, the knuckles white against his greenish skin.

"I am Sar Lauton, of the Eglan Directorate, commander of this ship," the alien said in fluent Terran.

"And I am Commander Alton Fiske of the Confederation Navy," Fiske replied. "I have transferred my men to this ship since you didn't leave much of mine."

"For that I am sorry," the Eglan said. "You fought well and deserved a better end. However, you still have won. It is finished." The Eglan smiled bitterly. "You see, Commander, we never knew that war could be such *horror*. To many of my crew it was too horrible. You undoubtedly saw some of them on your way here."

Fiske nodded. "Now about the surrender terms—" he began.

"There are no terms," the alien said woodenly. "You have won." His face twitched. "Can't you appreciate what your weapon has done? I am an Eglan. An Eglan never surrenders. Yet I and half my crew have surrendered. Don't you appreciate the implications of that? Can't you realize that the Directorate is doomed—that you have won a victory here that is more complete than any we have won in a thousand years of war?"

"But—"

"From birth," the Eglan went on, ignoring the abortive interruption, "we of the warrior caste have been trained to believe that there is no glory other than in battle—that the honor of the Directorate and its supremacy is paramount—that the Directorate must expand to bring the blessings of order to the less favored—that the orders of a superior are to be obeyed unquestioningly—that it is only right that we subordinate ourselves to the greater glory of the Eglan race—that our minds and lives are dedicated to this service—that there is no higher honor, no greater glory than to die for the Eglani." He sounded as though he was reciting a litany that had suddenly become no longer believable.

"But this, I find, is wrong. Such a belief is not life. It is death—extinction first of the soul, then of the mind, and finally of the body. Your weapon struck us here at the core of our belief and through our weakest link—a link we had to keep because, paradoxically, it was also the source of our strength and

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unity. Through our neurocommunicators your feelings, emotions, and beliefs waged battle with our own. And yours won because their truth was more basic and more just than our own. And so we were disarmed. We were confused. We could not hold control. And finally we could not kill—not even ourselves!" The muscle in his cheek twitched again.

Fiske drew a deep breath. With sudden understanding he recalled his own feelings when he had heard Ellen on that tape. But there must have been more than Ellen—much more. All those others—and somehow the Eglani had sensed the true meaning behind that nauseous gabble! And the meaning had destroyed them!

Of course, this single action wasn't the end of the war, but it was the beginning of the end. The war would go on, but now it wouldn't be humanity with its back against the wall. The Eglani, too, would know the meaning of defeat. Fiske sighed. Somehow he couldn't help feeling sorry for them. They were *too* understanding!

"Thank you," Sar Lauton said unexpectedly. "Your sympathy is appreciated."

Fiske looked at him uncomfortably. "Take him away, Oley," he said, "and put him with the others. I'm getting this crate out of here." Fiske sank into the control chair and scanned the board. There was no problem here. He knew Eglan centralized controls almost as well as his own. One man could operate this ship if necessary although it took many others to fight and service it.

He energized the drives and the ship moved ahead. The viewscreens glowed framing star studded space and the battered shape of the "Dauntless" falling slowly astern. The old girl lay quietly, coasting through space, gleaming faintly in the cold light of the distant stars. Slowly she shrank to a toy as the Eglan ship moved away.

It was time, Fiske thought, as he adjusted a vernier dial and pushed a small lever. The faint ion trail of the torpedo shone like a pale swordblade in the darkness vanishing toward the derelict astern. Seconds passed and then a gigantic fireball blotted out the stars, and with its dying the "Dauntless" was gone save for a fiercely radiating haze of molecules that spread rapidly outward through circumambient space. . . .

PEDERSEN came in quietly and took a seat opposite Fiske. "The prisoners are secure, sir, and our men are ready for Cth jump." he said.

"Good. We'll start familiariza-

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tion after we reach cruising component."

"Aye sir."

"The "Dauntless" is gone. Fiske said absently as he energized the converters and the ship shivered at the border of hyperspace.

"I know. I saw her die."

"She was a good ship."

"The best. She won our war."

"I hated to kill her, Oley."

"I know that too. But you had to do it."

Fiske sighed as he took the ship up through the Cth components. It handled smoothly enough, but not as smoothly as the "Dauntless." The two men sat silently with the control board between them.

Fiske spoke finally. "You know, Oley," he said. "I thought it was a calamity when Bordoni broke his recordings."

Pedersen looked at him soberly. "You might still be right," he said. "We're going to win this war now. We're going to win it completely. They can't stop us now we know their weakness."

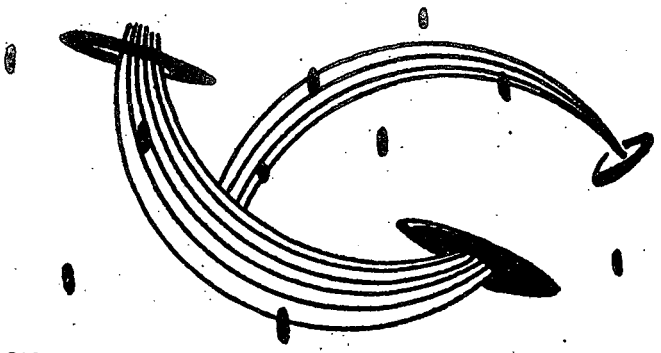
"And that's a calamity?"

"Possibly. After all—what are we going to do when we win? What sort of conquerors will *we* be? How will we treat them and the races they have conquered? We have no precedents. We've bypassed other intelligent races in our sphere. We've left them alone because we didn't know how to handle them, and we knew we didn't know. But we can't leave the Eglani alone. They're going to be our responsibility—and we've never learned to rule."

Fiske stared, shrugged, and grinned. "Could be that the Eglani will win after all—even though we defeat them in battle. They have the administrative experience."

Pedersen chuckled without humor. "You see what I mean? It still may be a calamity." . . .

THE END



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WIND

By CHARLES L. FONTENAY

When you have an engine with no fuel, and fuel without an engine, and a life-and-death deadline to meet, you have a problem indeed. Unless you are a stubborn Dutchman—and Jan Van Artevelde was the stubbornest Dutchman on Venus.

JAN WILLEM van Artevelde claimed descent from William of Orange. He had no genealogy to prove it, but on Venus there was no one who could disprove it, either.

Jan Willem van Artevelde smoked a clay pipe, which only a Dutchman can do properly, because the clay bit grates on less stubborn teeth.

Jan needed all his Dutch stubbornness, and a good deal of pure physical strength besides, to maneuver the roach-flat groundcar across the tumbled terrain of Den Hoorn into the teeth of the howling gale that swept from the west. The huge wheels twisted and jolted against the rocks outside, and Jan bounced against his seat belt, wrestled the steering wheel and puffed at his *pijp*. The mild aroma of Heerenbaai-Tabak filled the airtight groundcar.

There came a new swaying that was not the roughness of the terrain. Through the thick windshield Jan saw all the ground about him buckle and heave for a second or two before it settled to rugged quiescence again. This time he was really heaved about.

Jan mentioned this to the groundcar radio.

"That's the third time in half an hour," he commented. "The place tosses like the IJsselmeer on a rough day."

"You just don't forget it *isn't* the Zuider Zee," retorted Heemskerk from the other end. "You sink there and you don't come up three times."

"Don't worry," said Jan. "I'll be back on time, with a broom at the masthead."

"This I shall want to see," chuckled Heemskerk; a logical

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reaction, considering the scarcity of brooms on Venus.

Two hours earlier the two men had sat across a small table playing chess, with little indication there would be anything else to occupy their time before blast-off of the stubby gravity-boat. It would be their last chess game for many months, for Jan was a member of the Dutch colony at Oostpoort in the northern hemisphere of Venus, while Heemskerk was pilot of the G-boat from the Dutch spaceship *Vanderdecken*, scheduled to begin an Earthward orbit in a few hours.

It was near the dusk of the 485-hour Venerian day, and the Twilight Gale already had arisen, sweeping from the comparatively chill Venerian nightside into the superheated dayside. Oostpoort, established near some outcroppings that contained uranium ore, was protected from both the Dawn Gale and the Twilight Gale, for it was in a valley in the midst of a small range of mountains.

Jan had just figured out a combination by which he hoped to cheat Heemskerk out of one of his knights, when Dekker, the *burgemeester* of Oostpoort, entered the spaceport ready room.

"There's been an emergency radio message," said Dekker. "They've got a passenger for the Earthship over at Rathole."

"Rathole?" repeated Heemskerk. "What's that? I didn't know there was another colony within two thousand kilometers."

"It isn't a colony, in the sense Oostpoort is," explained Dekker. "The people are the families of a bunch of laborers left behind when the colony folded several years ago. It's about eighty kilometers away, right across the Hoorn, but they don't have any vehicles that can navigate when the wind's up."

Heemskerk pushed his short-billed cap back on his close-cropped head, leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his comfortable stomach.

"Then the passenger will have to wait for the next ship," he pronounced. "The *Vanderdecken* has to blast off in thirty hours to catch Earth at the right orbital spot, and the G-boat has to blast off in ten hours to catch the *Vanderdecken*."

"This passenger can't wait," said Dekker. "He needs to be evacuated to Earth immediately. He's suffering from the Venus Shadow."

Jan whistled softly. He had seen the effects of that disease. Dekker was right.

"Jan, you're the best driver in Oostpoort," said Dekker. "You will have to take a groundcar to Rathole and bring the fellow back."

So now Jan gripped his clay pipe between his teeth and piloted the groundcar into the teeth of the Twilight Gale.

Den Hoorn was a comparatively flat desert sweep that ran along the western side of the Oost Mountains, just over the

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mountain from Oostpoort. It was a thin fault area of a planet whose crust was peculiarly subject to earthquakes, particularly at the beginning and end of each long day when temperatures of the surface rocks changed. On the other side of it lay Rathole, a little settlement that eked a precarious living from the Venerian vegetation. Jan never had seen it.

He had little difficulty driving up and over the mountain, for the Dutch settlers had carved a rough road through the ravines. But even the 2½-meter wheels of the groundcar had trouble amid the tumbled rocks of Den Hoorn. The wind hit the car in full strength here and, though the body of the groundcar was suspended from the axles, there was constant danger of its being flipped over by a gust if not handled just right.

The three earthshocks that had shaken Den Hoorn since he had been driving made his task no easier, but he was obviously lucky, at that. Often he had to detour far from his course to skirt long, deep cracks in the surface, or steep breaks where the crust had been raised or dropped several meters by past quakes.

The groundcar zig-zagged slowly westward. The tattered violet-and-indigo clouds boiled low above it, but the wind was as dry as the breath of an oven. Despite the heavy cloud cover, the afternoon was as bright as an Earth-day. The thermometer showed the outside temperature to have dropped to 40 degrees Centigrade in the west wind, and it was still going down.

Jan reached the edge of a crack that made further progress seem impossible. A hundred meters wide, of unknown depth, it stretched out of sight in both directions. For the first time he entertained serious doubts that Den Hoorn could be crossed by land.

After a moment's hesitation, he swung the groundcar northward and raced along the edge of the chasm as fast as the car would negotiate the terrain. He looked anxiously at his watch. Nearly three hours had passed since he left Oostpoort. He had seven hours to go and he was still at least 16 kilometers from Rathole. His pipe was out, but he could not take his hands from the wheel to refill it.

He had driven at least eight kilometers before he realized that the crack was narrowing. At least as far again, the two edges came together, but not at the same level. A sheer cliff three meters high now barred his passage. He drove on.

Apparently it was the result of an old quake. He found a spot where rocks had tumbled down, making a steep, rough ramp up the break. He drove up it and turned back southwestward.

He made it just in time. He had driven less than three hundred meters when a quake more severe than any of the others struck. Suddenly behind him the

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break reversed itself, so that where he had climbed up coming westward he would now have to climb a cliff of equal height returning eastward.

The ground heaved and buckled like a tempestuous sea. Rocks rolled and leaped through the air, several large ones striking the groundcar with ominous force. The car staggered forward on its giant wheels like a drunken man. The quake was so violent that at one time the vehicle was hurled several meters sideways, and almost overturned. And the wind smashed down on it unrelentingly.

The quake lasted for several minutes, during which Jan was able to make no progress at all and struggled only to keep the groundcar upright. Then, in unison, both earthquake and wind died to absolute quiescence.

Jan made use of this calm to step down on the accelerator and send the groundcar speeding forward. The terrain was easier here, nearing the western edge of Den Hoorn, and he covered several kilometers before the wind struck again, cutting his speed down considerably. He judged he must be nearing Rathole.

Not long thereafter, he rounded an outcropping of rock and it lay before him.

A wave of nostalgia swept over him. Back at Oostpoort, the power was nuclear, but this little settlement made use of the cheapest, most obviously available power source. It was dotted with more than a dozen windmills.

Windmills! Tears came to Jan's eyes. For a moment, he was carried back to the flat lands around 's Gravenhage. For a moment he was a tow-headed, round-eyed boy again, clumping in wooden shoes along the edge of the tulip fields.

But there were no canals here. The flat land, stretching into the darkening west, was spotted with patches of cactus and leather-leaved Venerian plants. Amid the windmills, low domes protruded from the earth, indicating that the dwellings of Rathole were, appropriately, partly underground.

He drove into the place. There were no streets, as such, but there were avenues between lines of heavy chains strung to short iron posts, evidently as handholds against the wind. The savage gale piled dust and sand in drifts against the domes, then, shifting slightly, swept them clean again.

There was no one moving abroad, but just inside the community Jan found half a dozen men in a group, clinging to one of the chains and waving to him. He pulled the groundcar to a stop beside them, stuck his pipe in a pocket of his plastic venusuit, donned his helmet and got out.

The wind almost took him away before one of them grabbed him and he was able to grasp the chain himself. They

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gathered around him. They were swarthy, black-eyed men, with curly hair. One of them grasped his hand.

"Bienvenido, señor," said the man.

Jan recoiled and dropped the man's hand. All the Orangeman blood he claimed protested in outrage.

Spaniards! All these men were Spaniards!

Jan recovered himself at once. He had been reading too much ancient history during his leisure hours. The hot monotony of Venus was beginning to affect his brain. It had been 500 years since the Netherlands revolted against Spanish rule. A lot of water over the dam since then.

A look at the men around him, the sound of their chatter, convinced him that he need not try German or Hollandsch here. He fell back on the international language.

"Do you speak English?" he asked. The man brightened but shook his head.

"No, hablo inglés," he said, *"pero el médico lo habla. Venga conmigo."*

He gestured for Jan to follow him and started off, pulling his way against the wind along the chain. Jan followed, and the other men fell in behind in single file. A hundred meters farther on, they turned, descended some steps and entered one of the half-buried domes. A gray-haired, bearded man was in the well-lighted room, apparently the living room of a home, with a young woman.

"El médico," said the man who had greeted Jan, gesturing. *El habla inglés."*

He went out, shutting the air-lock door behind him.

"You must be the man from Oostpoort," said the bearded man, holding out his hand. "I am Doctor Sanchez. We are very grateful you have come."

"I thought for a while I wouldn't make it," said Jan ruefully, removing his venushelmet.

"This is Mrs. Murillo," said Sanchez.

The woman was a Spanish blonde, full-lipped and beautiful, with golden hair and dark, liquid eyes. She smiled at Jan.

"Encantada de conocerlo, señor," she greeted him.

"Is this the patient, Doctor?" asked Jan, astonished. She looked in the best of health.

"No, the patient is in the next room," answered Sanchez.

"Well, as much as I'd like to stop for a pipe, we'd better start at once," said Jan. "It's a hard drive back, and blastoff can't be delayed."

The woman seemed to sense his meaning. She turned and called: *"Diego!"*

A boy appeared in the door, a dark-skinned, sleepy-eyed boy of about eight. He yawned. Then, catching sight of the big Dutchman, he opened his eyes wide and smiled.

The boy was healthy-looking, alert, but the mark of the Venus Shadow was on his face. There

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was a faint mottling, a criss-cross of dead-white lines.

Mrs. Murillo spoke to him rapidly in Spanish and he nodded. She zipped him into a venusuit and fitted a small helmet on his head.

"Good luck, *amigo*," said Sanchez, shaking Jan's hand again.

"Thanks," replied Jan. He donned his own helmet. "I'll need it, if the trip over was any indication."

Jan and Diego made their way back down the chain to the groundcar. There was a score of men there now, and a few women. They let the pair go through, and waved farewell as Jan swung the groundcar around and headed back eastward.

It was easier driving with the wind behind him, and Jan hit a hundred kilometers an hour several times before striking the rougher ground of Den Hoorn. Now, if he could only find a way over the bluff raised by that last quake . . .

The ground of Den Hoorn was still shivering, Jan did not realize this until he had to brake the groundcar almost to a stop at one point, because it was not shaking in severe, periodic shocks as it had earlier. It quivered constantly, like the surface of quicksand.

The ground far ahead of him had a strange color to it. Jan, watching for the cliff he had to skirt and scale, had picked up speed over some fairly even terrain, but now he slowed again, puzzled. There was something wrong ahead. He couldn't quite figure it out.

Diego, beside him, had sat quietly so far, peering eagerly through the windshield, not saying a word. Now suddenly he cried in a high thin tenor:

"Cuidado! Cuidado! Un abismo!"

Jim saw it at the same time and hit the brakes so hard the groundcar would have stood on its nose had its wheels been smaller. They skidded to a stop.

The chasm that had caused him such a long detour before had widened, evidently in the big quake that had hit earlier. Now it was a canyon, half a kilometer wide. Five meters from the edge he looked out over blank space at the far wall, and could not see the bottom.

Cursing choice Dutch profanity, Jan wheeled the groundcar northward and drove along the edge of the abyss as fast as he could. He wasted half an hour before realizing that it was getting no narrower.

There was no point in going back southward. It might be a hundred kilometers long or a thousand, but he never could reach the end of it and thread the tumbled rocks of Den Hoorn to Oostpoort before the G-boat blastoff.

There was nothing to do but turn back to Rathole and see if some other way could not be found.

Jan sat in the half-buried room and enjoyed the luxury of a pipe

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filled with some of Theodorus Neimeijer's mild tobacco. Before him, Dr. Sanchez sat with crossed legs, cleaning his fingernails with a scalpel. Diego's mother talked to the boy in low, liquid tones in a corner of the room.

Jan was at a loss to know how people whose technical knowledge was as skimpy as it obviously was in Rathole were able to build these semi-underground domes to resist the earth shocks that came from Den Hoorn. But this one showed no signs of stress. A religious print and a small pencil sketch of Señora Murillo, probably done by the boy, were awry on the inward-curving walls, but that was all.

Jan felt justifiably exasperated at these Spanish-speaking people.

"If some effort had been made to take the boy to Oostpoort from here, instead of calling on us to send a car, Den Hoorn could have been crossed before the crack opened," he pointed out.

"An effort was made," replied Sanchez quietly. "Perhaps you do not fully realize our position here. We have no engines except the stationary generators that give us current for our air-conditioning and our utilities. They are powered by the windmills. We do not have gasoline engines for vehicles, so our vehicles are operated by hand."

"You push them?" demanded Jan incredulously.

"No. You've seen pictures of the pump-cars that once were used on terrestrial railroads? Ours are powered like that, but we cannot operate them when the Venerian wind is blowing. By the time I diagnosed the Venus Shadow in Diego, the wind was coming up, and we had no way to get him to Oostpoort."

"Mmm," grunted Jan. He shifted uncomfortably and looked at the pair in the corner. The blonde head was bent over the boy protectingly, and over his mother's shoulder Diego's black eyes returned Jan's glance.

"If the disease has just started, the boy could wait for the next Earth ship, couldn't he?" asked Jan.

"I said I had just diagnosed it, not that it had just started, *señor*," corrected Sanchez. "As you know, the trip to Earth takes 145 days and it can be started only when the two planets are at the right position in their orbits. Have you ever seen anyone die of the Venus Shadow?"

"Yes, I have," replied Jan in a low voice. He had seen two people die of it, and it had not been pleasant.

Medical men thought it was a deficiency disease, but they had not traced down the deficiency responsible. Treatment by vitamins, diet, antibiotics, infrared and ultraviolet rays, all were useless. The only thing that could arrest and cure the disease was removal from the dry, cloud-hung surface of Venus and return to a moist, sunny climate on Earth.

Without that treatment, once the typical mottled texture of the

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skin appeared, the flesh rapidly deteriorated and fell away in chunks. The victim remained unfevered and agonizingly conscious until the degeneration reached a vital spot.

"If you have," said Sanchez, "you must realize that Diego cannot wait for a later ship, if his life is to be saved. He must get to Earth at once."

Jan puffed at the Heerenbaai-Tabak and cogitated. The place was aptly named. It was a ratty community. The boy was a dark-skinned little Spaniard—of Mexican origin, perhaps. But he was a boy, and a human being.

A thought occurred to him. From what he had seen and heard, the entire economy of Rathole could not support the tremendous expense of sending the boy across the millions of miles to Earth by spaceship.

"Who's paying his passage?" he asked. "The Dutch Central Venus Company isn't exactly a charitable institution."

"Your *Señor* Dekker said that would be taken care of," replied Sanchez.

Jan relit his pipe silently, making a mental resolution that Dekker wouldn't take care of it alone. Salaries for Venerian service were high, and many of the men at Oostpoort would contribute readily to such a cause.

"Who is Diego's father?" he asked.

He was Ramón Murillo, a very good mechanic," answered Sanchez, with a sliding sidelong glance at Jan's face. "He has been dead for three years."

Jan grunted.

"The copters at Oostpoort can't buck this wind," he said thoughtfully, "or I'd have come in one of those in the first place instead of trying to cross Den Hoorn by land. But if you have any sort of aircraft here, it might make it downwind—if it isn't wrecked on takeoff."

"I'm afraid not," said Sanchez.

"Too bad. There's nothing we can do, then. The nearest settlement west of here is more than a thousand kilometers away, and I happen to know they have no planes, either. Just 'copters. So that's no help."

"Wait," said Sanchez, lifting the scalpel and tilting his head. "I believe there is something, though we cannot use it. This was once an American naval base, and the people here were civilian employes who refused to move north with it. There was a flying machine they used for short-range work, and one was left behind—probably with a little help from the people of the settlement. But . . ."

"What kind of machine? Copter or plane?"

"They call it a flying platform. It carries two men, I believe. But, *señor* . . ."

"I know them. I've operated them, before I left Earth. Man, you don't expect me to try to fly one of those little things in this wind? They're tricky as they can be, and the passengers are absolutely unprotected!"

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"*Señor*, I have asked you to do nothing."

"No, you haven't," muttered Jan. "But you know I'll do it."

Sanchez looked into his face, smiling faintly and a little sadly.

"I was sure you would be willing," he said. He turned and spoke in Spanish to Mrs. Murillo.

The woman rose to her feet and came to them. As Jan arose, she looked up at him, tears in her eyes.

"*Gracias*," she murmured. "*Un millón de gracias.*"

She lifted his hands in hers and kissed them.

Jan disengaged himself gently, embarrassed. But it occurred to him, looking down on the bowed head of the beautiful young widow, that he might make some flying trips back over here in his leisure time. Language barriers were not impassable, and feminine companionship might cure his neurotic, history-born distaste for Spaniards, for more than one reason.

Sanchez was tugging at his elbow.

"*Señor*, I have been trying to tell you," he said. "It is generous and good of you, and I wanted *Señora* Murillo to know what a brave man you are. But have you forgotten that we have no gasoline engines here? There is no fuel for the flying platform."

The platform was in a warehouse which, like the rest of the structures in Rathole, was a half-buried dome. The platform's ring-shaped base was less than a meter thick, standing on four metal legs. On top of it, in the center, was a railed circle that would hold two men, but would crowd them. Two small gasoline engines sat on each side of this railed circle and between them on a third side was the fuel tank. The passengers entered it on the fourth side.

The machine was dusty and spotted with rust. Jan, surrounded by Sanchez, Diego and a dozen men, inspected it thoughtfully. The letters USN*SES were painted in white on the platform itself, and each engine bore the label "Hiller."

Jan peered over the edge of the platform at the twin ducted fans in their plastic shrouds. They appeared in good shape. Each was powered by one of the engines, transmitted to it by heavy rubber belts.

Jan sighed. It was an unhappy situation. As far as he could determine, without making tests, the engines were in perfect condition. Two perfectly good engines, and no fuel for them.

"You're sure there's no gasoline, anywhere in Rathole?" he asked Sanchez.

Sanchez smiled ruefully, as he had once before, at Jan's appellation for the community. The inhabitants' term for it was simply "*La Ciudad Nuestra*" — "Our Town." But he made no protest. He turned to one of the other men and talked rapidly for a few moments in Spanish.

"None, *señor*," he said, turning back to Jan. "The Americans, of

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course, kept much of it when they were here, but the few things we take to Oostpoort to trade could not buy precious gasoline. We have electricity in plenty if you can power the platform with it."

Jan thought that over, trying to find a way.

"No, it wouldn't work," he said. "We could rig batteries on the platform and electric motors to turn the propellers. But batteries big enough to power it all the way to Oostpoort would be so heavy the machine couldn't lift them off the ground. If there were some way to carry a power line all the way to Oostpoort, or to broadcast the power to it . . . But it's a light-load machine, and must have an engine that gives it the necessary power from very little weight."

Wild schemes ran through his head. If they were on water, instead of land, he could rig up a sail. He could still rig up a sail, for a groundcar, except for the chasm out on Den Hoorn.

The groundcar! Jan straightened and snapped his fingers.

"Doctor!" he explained. "Send a couple of men to drain the rest of the fuel from my groundcar. And let's get this platform above ground and tie it down until we can get it started."

Sanchez gave rapid orders in Spanish. Two of the men left at a run, carrying five-gallon cans with them.

Three others picked up the platform and carried it up a ramp and outside. As soon as they reached ground level, the wind hit them. They dropped the platform to the ground, where it shuddered and swayed momentarily, and two of the men fell successfully on their stomachs. The wind caught the third and somersaulted him half a dozen times before he skidded to a stop on his back with outstretched arms and legs. He turned over cautiously and crawled back to them.

Jan, his head just above ground level, surveyed the terrain. There was flat ground to the east, clear in a fairly broad alley for at least half a kilometer before any of the domes protruded up into it.

"This is as good a spot for takeoff as we'll find," he said to Sanchez.

The men put three heavy ropes on the platform's windward rail and secured it by them to the heavy chain that ran by the dome. The platform quivered and shuddered in the heavy wind, but its base was too low for it to overturn.

Shortly the two men returned with the fuel from the groundcar, struggling along the chain. Jan got above ground in a crouch, clinging to the rail of the platform, and helped them fill the fuel tank with it. He primed the carburetors and spun the engines.

Nothing happened.

He turned the engines over again. One of them coughed, and a cloud of blue smoke burst from

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its exhaust, but they did not catch.

"What is the matter, *señor?*" asked Sanchez from the dome entrance.

"I don't know," replied Jan. "Maybe it's that the engines haven't been used in so long. I'm afraid I'm not a good enough mechanic to tell."

"Some of these men were good mechanics when the navy was here," said Sanchez. "Wait."

He turned and spoke to someone in the dome. One of the men of Rathole came to Jan's side and tried the engines. They refused to catch. The man made carburetor adjustments and tried again. No success.

He sniffed, took the cap from the fuel tank and stuck a finger inside. He withdrew it, wet and oily, and examined it. He turned and spoke to Sanchez.

"He says that your groundcar must have a diesel engine," Sanchez interpreted to Jan. "Is that correct?"

"Why, yes, that's true."

"He says the fuel will not work then, *señor*. He says it is low-grade fuel and the platform must have high octane gasoline."

Jan threw up his hands and went back into the dome.

"I should have known that," he said unhappily. "I would have known if I had thought of it."

"What is to be done, then?" asked Sanchez.

"There's nothing that can be done," answered Jan. "They may as well put the fuel back in my groundcar."

Sanchez called orders to the men at the platform. While they worked, Jan stared out at the furiously spinning windmills that dotted Rathole.

"There's nothing that can be done," he repeated. "We can't make the trip overland because of the chasm out there in Del Hoorn, and we can't fly the platform because we have no power for it."

Windmills. Again Jan could imagine the flat land around them as his native Holland, with the Zuider Zee sparkling to the west where here the desert stretched under darkling clouds.

Jan looked at his watch. A little more than two hours before the G-boat's blastoff time, and it couldn't wait for them. It was nearly eight hours since he had left Oostpoort, and the afternoon was getting noticeably darker.

Jan was sorry. He had done his best, but Venus had beaten him.

He looked around for Diego. The boy was not in the dome. He was outside, crouched in the lee of the dome, playing with some sticks.

Diego must know of his ailment, and why he had to go to Oostpoort. If Jan was any judge of character, Sanchez would have told him that. Whether Diego knew it was a life-or-death matter for him to be aboard the *Vanderdecken* when it blasted off for Earth, Jan did not know. But the boy was around eight years old and he was bright, and

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he must realize the seriousness involved in a decision to send him all the way to Earth.

Jan felt ashamed of the exuberant foolishness which had led him to spout ancient history and claim descent from William of Orange. It had been a hobby, and artificial topic for conversation that amused him and his companions, a defense against the monotony of Venus that had begun to affect his personality perhaps a bit more than he realized. He did not dislike Spaniards; he had no reason to dislike them. They were all humans—the Spanish, the Dutch, the Germans, the Americans, even the Russians — fighting a hostile planet together. He could not understand a word Diego said when the boy spoke to him, but he liked Diego and wished desperately he could do something.

Outside, the windmills of Rathole spun merrily.

There was power, the power that lighted and air-conditioned Rathole, power in the air all around them. If he could only use it! But to turn the platform on its side and let the wind spin the propellers was pointless.

He turned to Sanchez.

"Ask the men if there are any spare parts for the platform," he said. "Some of those legs it stands on, transmission belts, spare propellers."

Sanchez asked.

"Yes," he said. "Many spare parts, but no fuel."

Jan smiled a tight smile.

"Tell them to take the engines out," he said. "Since we have no fuel, we may as well have no engines."

Pieter Heemskerk stood by the ramp to the stubby G-boat and checked his watch. It was X minus fifteen—fifteen minutes before blastoff time.

Heemskerk wore a spacesuit. Everything was ready, except climbing aboard, closing the airlock and pressing the firing pin.

What on Venus could have happened to Van Artevelde? The last radio message they had received, more than an hour ago, had said he and the patient took off successfully in an aircraft. What sort of aircraft could he be flying that would require an hour to cover eighty kilometers, with the wind?

Heemskerk could only draw the conclusion that the aircraft had been wrecked somewhere in Den Hoorn. As a matter of fact, he knew that preparations were being made now to send a couple of groundcars out to search for it.

This, of course, would be too late to help the patient Van Artevelde was bringing, but Heemskerk had no personal interest in the patient. His worry was all for his friend. The two of them had enjoyed chess and good beer together on his last three trips to Venus, and Heemskerk hoped very sincerely that the big blond man wasn't hurt.

He glanced at his watch again. X minus twelve. In two minutes, it would be time for him to walk up the ramp into the G-boat. In

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seven minutes the backward count before blastoff would start over the area loudspeakers.

Heemskerk shook his head sadly. And Van Artevelde had promised to come back triumphant, with a broom at his masthead!

It was a high thin whine borne on the wind, carrying even through the walls of his spacehelmet, that attracted Heemskerk's attention and caused him to pause with his foot on the ramp. Around him, the rocket mechanics were staring up at the sky, trying to pinpoint the noise.

Heemskerk looked westward. At first he could see nothing, then there was a moving dot above the mountain, against the indigo umbrella of clouds. It grew, it swooped, it approached and became a strange little flying disc with two people standing on it and *something* sticking up from its deck in front of them.

A broom?

No. The platform hovered and began to settle nearby, and there was Van Artevelde leaning over its rail and fiddling frantically with whatever it was that stuck up on it—a weird, angled contraption of pipes and belts topped by a whirring blade. A boy stood at his shoulder and tried to help him. As the platform descended to a few meters above ground, the Dutchman slashed at the contraption, the cut ends of belts whipped out wildly and the platform slid to the ground with a rush. It hit with a clatter and its two passengers tumbled prone to the ground.

"Jan!" boomed Heemskerk, forcing his voice through the helmet diaphragm and rushing over to his friend. "I was afraid you were lost!"

Jan struggled to his feet and leaned down to help the boy up.

"Here's your patient, Pieter," he said. "Hope you have a spacesuit in his size."

"I can find one. And we'll have to hurry for blastoff. But, first, what happened? Even that damned thing ought to get here from Rathole faster than that."

"Had no fuel," replied Jan briefly. "My engines were all right, but I had no power to run them. So I had to pull the engines and rig up a power source."

Heemskerk stared at the platform. On its railing was rigged a tripod of battered metal pipes, atop which a big four-blade propeller spun slowly in what wind was left after it came over the western mountain. Over the edges of the platform, running from the two propellers in its base, hung a series of tattered transmission belts.

"Power source?" repeated Heemskerk. "That?"

"Certainly," replied Jan with dignity. "The power source any good Dutchman turns to in an emergency: a windmill!"

THE END

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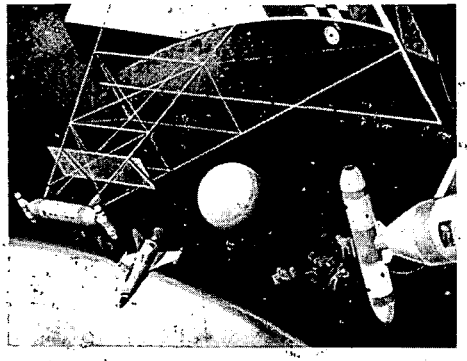

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